

careful son (you got dreamer's plans)

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careful son (you got dreamer's plans)

by [angelsdemonsducks](#)

Summary

Wilbur gasps back to life with mud between his fingers and rain in his eyes.

Wilbur was dead. Now, he is not. He can't say that he's particularly happy about it.

Unfortunately, the server is still as tumultuous as ever, even with Dream locked away, so it seems that his involvement in things isn't a matter of *if*, but *when*.

(Alternatively: the prodigal son returns, and a broken family finally begins to heal. If, that is, the egg doesn't get them all killed first.)

soldier, keep on

Chapter Notes

A few things before we start:

I'm currently taking a bit of a breather from my primary fandom, which... apparently means that I'm writing Minecraft fanfiction? Which I'm a bit confused by, considering that I don't actually play Minecraft? But these block men are strangely compelling, so here I am, I guess.

Here's the standard disclaimer that I am writing about the rp characters as they are portrayed on the smp, and I do not in any way intend for these characters to be reflections of the actual content creators. Also, all relationships in this fic are strictly platonic.

And here's another disclaimer just to say that I'm very new to this fandom. As in, I... know the broad strokes of the plot up to this point? But there's so much content that I haven't watched yet, so please forgive any errors I make with the lore. I'll also be using a good bit of headcanon and popular fanon, so basically just take the canon divergence tag for what it's worth and go from there (and generally, anything from after Jan. 20th won't be canon for this fic unless it's stated otherwise).

And with all that said, here we go. Content warnings for this chapter include swearing and sort-of suicidal ideation (just in that Wilbur is currently very much not happy to be back).

Fic title and chapter titles are from 'Soldier' by Fleurie.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur gasps back to life with mud between his fingers and rain in his eyes.

It is an ugly thing, reviving like this. His body does not remember what it is to live. The sensations are overwhelming: the ground beneath him, cold and wet, the freezing air against his skin, the force of gravity that keeps him pinned down. It takes a moment for him to recall how to breathe, to even recall that he needs to do so at all, after that first instinctive inhalation. His lungs are burning, and fear washes over him, builds within him—but the memory comes. His lungs inflate. Deflate. Too quickly, at first, too shallowly, but he falls into a rhythm soon enough.

Breathing. He is breathing. He is alive. His fingers curl into the grass, the slick dirt, and he shudders at the feeling. He thinks he might shake apart right here, right now, shake apart and back to death again.

He doesn't want to be here.

His mind is fuzzy, whirling, confused, and his thoughts are so much scattered snow, but this much he knows. He does not want to be alive, does not want to be here, does not want *this*—

But since when has he had a choice in the matter?

Sitting up is slow. Strange. It takes more effort than it should, and it sets his head to spinning as he blinks the water from his eyes. His vision clears enough to see where he is: a forest, not too dense, the trees sparsely placed. He is sitting beneath one, and as if to reward the realization, the leaves jerk in a sudden wind, dumping several large drops of water on his head. He frowns up at them, and at the grey sky beyond. And then has to look down again—there is more rain in his eyes, and the sting of it is unpleasant, too sharp. Every sensation feels like too much, too present and too raw and too close.

He should stand, he thinks. But he stares at his legs, and wonders if they will hold his weight. They don't look as if they will. They are shaking. His whole body is shaking, shaking apart and back to—

(you could only be so lucky)

He stands. He lurches to the side, at first, has to grip the tree for balance as his legs adjust to holding him up. His head pounds, spins, and he squeezes his eyes shut against the wave of vertigo.

And then opens them.

The laughter comes unbidden, welling up from somewhere dark, somewhere despairing. It echoes in his ears until it's all that he can hear, all that he knows, curling around him, manic and wild. It is a villain's laugh. A villain's laugh for a villain, a villain with blood caking his hands and madness pressing on the edges of his mind

(is it progress, that he can recognize it now?)

(but is it madness? or is it just him? what is real, the brother that he used to be, or the shattered, destructive thing that he became? can he blame his actions on madness when he enjoyed every moment?)

(he did enjoy it, he did, he did, and if he says it often enough perhaps it will be)

and now a heart pumping in his chest, alive, alive, alive. Alive, when he never wanted it, when he explicitly *told* Tommy *not* to—

Not to what? To bring him back? Tommy wanted him, but Dream is the one with the power, or so Tommy said. Dream, alive just like him, when he has no right to be. A villain just like him, but not, but worse

(who do you think you're fooling? how much of Tommy's pain can be laid at your feet?)

for all that he's done. To Tommy, to everyone on the server, even to those who once counted him as a friend.

(He was one, wasn't he? In the early days, in the peaceful days, before the war? They were all friends, then, when Dream invited them to his world, invited them to make a home and to stay, and he really thought that he could settle here, with his little brother and with everyone else. He was friends with Dream, then.)

(The war was a game, in the beginning. He can't pinpoint the moment when that changed.)

And perhaps Tommy forced the issue, forced the resurrection. But Dream still made the choice to do it. In the end, he is back at Dream's behest and at no one else's, and anger stirs in him, that he is in any way beholden to that bastard, to the asshole who caused so much pain, so much suffering, who tormented and abused his little brother

(but you did the same, don't forget)

to the point of—

He is not Ghostbur. Not in any way that matters, just like Ghostbur wasn't truly him. But he remembers what Ghostbur knew, more or less, and more than that, he understands in a way that Ghostbur was never capable of. In a way, part of him envies Ghostbur his naivety. Most of him doesn't, though, isn't capable of anything more than a vague disgust at best. Naivety helps no one, does nothing. The naive either learn better, or they die. That's the way the world works, has always been the way that the world works.

The point is, he has perspective that Ghostbur didn't. He knows what Dream did. What he'll do again, if given the chance, and he will have that chance. Tommy's decision to spare him has guaranteed as much. Even the most inescapable prison cannot hold someone like Dream forever.

He forms a fist. Punches the tree. It smarts, and finally, here is a sensation that does not overwhelm him, that is almost comforting in its familiarity, that clears his head and allows him to focus. There is solid ground beneath his feet and water dripping from his soaked hair onto his face. He is in a forest that he doesn't recognize. His heart beats in his chest.

Alive, alive, alive.

“What the fuck have you done?” he murmurs, and his voice is a broken, frayed thing. Unsurprisingly, he receives no answer, and his mind is left to invent them, each more terrible than the last.

This much is clear, though, he needs to

(find his family)

(see Dream dead)

(blow them all to hell and back because why not, what more is there to lose)

(run run run as far and as fast as possible)

get to Tommy? Get to Tommy. Yes. That's the first step. Get to Tommy, shake the life out of him until he owns up to whatever the hell he was thinking with this. Learn more about how he defeated Dream in the first place, because surely that will be relevant information, because surely the second step will be to kill Dream. He's too dangerous to be kept alive, and he's outlived his use anyway.

If Tommy truly spared him just so that he would... *resurrect* Wilbur, well. He's served his purpose. There's no reason to keep him breathing.

Even if—

Well.

He'll think about it when the time comes.

(he doesn't want to be here, please, let him rest, let him be free)

For now, he is here, and he has a goal, has a plan. So he takes his first step forward, and finds walking easier than he expected. His muscles seem to remember how to do it, now, and his strides grow longer and longer until he is a hair's breadth away from running, sprinting through the trees, and his legs begin to burn, and it is a good burn, a burn that comes from simple exertion, from the revolutionary act of living, and the rain pours down and giddiness fills him, if just for a moment. If just for a moment, he thinks that perhaps this might not be such a bad thing after all.

If just for a moment.

He breaks through the tree line. And stops.

He knows where he is.

He hadn't realized before, how cold it was. Or rather, he realized it distantly, in the manner of things that don't quite effect him, that he acknowledges but doesn't have to think on. But it does effect him, and as his adrenaline wears off, chills run across his body, his skin erupting in gooseflesh. He's not dressed for this climate, is wearing the same clothes he died in, the white shirt and the trenchcoat that does little in the way of providing warmth.

But he knows where he is.

Or rather, Ghostbur did, so now he does. There is snow in the distance, about a twenty minute walk, perhaps. The border of the tundra. From there, it isn't far to Techno's base. Another half hour on foot, if the weather isn't too bad.

Techno.

He hadn't even thought to go see him. Hadn't spared a thought for his other brother, or for his father, who he knows is staying with him. But they are so close, right there, and his objective is to get to Tommy, but

(he wants to see them, wants them so bad, wants his brother's protective glare and his father's warm embrace)

he doesn't know where Tommy is, does he? He has a general idea, but no more than that, and even besides, he doesn't know anything about the current politics of the server, other than the fact that Dream is locked away. Who does that leave in charge, if anyone? Who is on whose side? What sides are left at all?

He needs more information. Techno isn't likely to be in the loop, all things considered, but even a little bit of intelligence would be better than no intelligence at all. And he's closer. A warm house sounds very nice right now.

He considers his objectives, and makes a mental readjustment. Tommy can be second, Dream third. That's fine. Techno first.

If, that is, Techno allows him in. If he doesn't slam the door on his face. If he doesn't kill him again. He liked Ghostbur, Wilbur thinks, but Ghostbur was Ghostbur, and he is himself, and he doesn't know where they stood with each other, by the end. Doesn't know whether Techno will be glad to see him at all. That shouldn't matter to him, though. It shouldn't matter at all what Techno thinks of him,

(even if something in him balks at the idea that Techno might hate him, that Techno, his brother who he has protected and pestered in equal measure, who has done the same for him since the day Phil took his hand and brought him home and said to the piglin hybrid waiting at the door, *Techno, this is your new brother Wilbur; please don't kill each other*)

since he has his goals, and those are what's important. So really, if Techno turns him away, he's no worse off, if a little colder and wetter. He goes back to the original plan of getting to Tommy, killing Dream. In that order.

Right. Right.

This will work.

It will be several hours of walking through the cold. Best to start now. So he does, walking at a steady pace, aiming for the snow, and—

Something blue.

Something blue flashes in the corner of his eye, and he freezes, wheels around, his heart pounding in his ears. His eyes dart around, but there is nothing there, nothing that he can see. No movement in the trees behind him. No movement in the grass around him. No movement in the snowy climate ahead. No movement, but then, that doesn't mean that nothing is there, that he didn't see anything at all,

(because it's not paranoia if they're really out to get you)

and he's certain that he did. That he saw blue.

Blue has strange connotations for him, now. He's not Ghostbur. But Ghostbur's memories linger.

"Who's there?" he calls out, and is proud of the way his voice holds steady. There is no reply, and still no movement. "You can come out, if you want to talk. I'm unarmed," he adds, and immediately regrets it. If there is someone there, there is a good likelihood that they mean him harm. He didn't exactly... *leave* on a good note, and advertising his lack of a weapon to someone who might very well want to kill him is not a good idea.

But nothing happens either way. No one steps out from behind a tree to talk. No one jumps out and tries to stab him. He waits for a few minutes before admitting defeat and turning back to his path.

Perhaps he imagined it. It wouldn't be the strangest thing that's ever happened to him.

(but he didn't, he knows he didn't, and he's pretty sure that there's something he's forgetting)

He'll be alert. Careful. Watchful. It's all he can do at this point.

So, with a heart beating in his chest and lungs that breathe and feet that touch the ground, Wilbur goes off to find his brother.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter to begin with, but my chapters tend to get longer as I get more secure in my characterization. This is the first time in a while that I've started posting a fic without having any other chapters already written, so I honestly have no idea what the update schedule will be like? But I hope to get chapters out as soon as I finish them. I'm armed with a very vague plot outline and determination, so we'll see where that gets me! I'll be updating the tags as new ones become relevant, too.

Also, I think I'm gonna try to reply to comments, which is something that I don't always do because I'm big anxious literally all of the time. But if I don't get to yours, or if it takes me a little while, please know that I still read it and squealed over it, because comments are my motivation to keep going and I treasure each and every one I get!

Next up, Chapter Two: In which Wilbur makes it to Technoblade, and a conversation is had.

shiver to that broken beat

Chapter Notes

Over a hundred kudos on chapter one?? Y'all are so amazing, thank you so much!

Content warnings for this chapter include swearing, references to scars, and slightly suicidal ideation (again, due to Wilbur's not-so-great mental state atm).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He underestimated how cold he would get. By the time he finally finds Techno's cabin, Ghostbur's memories guiding him over the hills, he's fairly certain that his fingers and toes are halfway to frostbite, and he's shivering uncontrollably. If Techno ends up wanting to kill him, he won't have to do much. Not letting him inside would be enough.

He isn't sure if he'd respawn. Isn't sure if he's got another three lives, or if it's just the one. Whether it's three lives to live, three lives to lose, three lives to waste, three lives that he shouldn't have in the first place, three lives to spare. Two lives to throw away, if need be. Or if it's just the one.

(the one that he never wanted at all)

(an image flashes: Tommy staring into lava. Ghostbur found him like that, once, and thinking about it now makes his heart stutter in his chest)

He mounts the steps to Techno's cabin, sparing a glance for—are those polar bears? Does Techno have polar bears tied up outside? He shakes his head, because *yes, of course he does, it's Techno*, and then he is standing in front of the door, and he's suddenly feeling a lot more trepidation about this whole thing. It's irrational, really, but he can't shake it, can't shake the fear that this is going to go terribly, and this whole journey was a mistake.

“Fuck,” he murmurs, his breath puffing in front of his face. “Fuck everything.” The swearing doesn't make him feel much better, but watching his breath fog up does remind him that he is very cold, and that he needs to be inside now. Even if this ends in him respawning, it'll be somewhere warmer than this, hopefully.

He knocks. Four times, loudly. There is no response, so he does it again. There is still no answer, and he can't resist the dark glare that he casts at the door. If he's come all this way only for Techno to not be home, he's going to be very put out. He's also definitely not above breaking into his house, if need be.

He knocks one last time for good measure, already mapping his way in. There's a window he can break—

“Hold your horses, I’m coming!”

It’s unmistakably Techno’s voice, and every muscle in Wilbur’s body tenses up, ready to fight, ready to flee, ready to do whatever the moment asks of him. For a brief, hysterical moment, he entertains the idea of abandoning this whole thing, of ducking out of sight and letting Techno think that it was someone playing a prank. This is the last moment to back out.

He doesn’t, in spite of his better judgment,

(or perhaps because of it, he doesn’t know, doesn’t even know if he has ‘better’ judgment at all, these days)

and he jams his hands in his pockets and tries for all the world to adopt a casual pose before the door is swinging open, and Techno is there.

(his brother is there)

“Alright, who—” Techno starts, and stops just as quickly, staring at him with wide eyes.

Techno looks... good. He looks good. Dressed in warm layers, that damn red cape he’s so fond of flowing out behind him, his stupid crown on his head. His hair is braided neatly, his tusks sharpened to gleaming points, and if, perhaps, the bags under his eyes are a bit darker than they should be, Wilbur won’t point it out. What’s a little lost sleep, in the grand scheme of things? Technoblade seems like he’s thriving up here, the Antarctic Empire all over again, and Wilbur feels a sharp flare of

(jealousy)

(relief)

emotion. He tries not to let it show on his face.

“Hello, Technoblade,” he says. “Can I come in?”

For a long minute, Techno says nothing at all. Just stares, motionless, unblinking. Wilbur can’t remember the last time he saw his brother look so shocked.

(yes you can, you liar, you dirty liar, it was the first time he heard you yell at Tommy, really rip into him, and the shock was only there for a second, he hid it well, but you saw it, you know you did, you just pretended not to, pretended that this was all normal and what you were doing was justified)

“I hate to press you, but it’s fucking freezing,” he adds.

“Shit,” Techno says. “Shit, how are you—Phil said that it didn’t—*Wilbur*.” He bursts into motion, then, and Wilbur barely tamps down the instinct to punch him, to claw at him and fight and *get away* as he suddenly steps forward, gripping him by the forearms, crushingly enough to hurt, to leave bruises later. Wilbur furrows his brow at this reaction, but doesn’t have too much time to think about it, because Techno is *right there* now, right in his face, and

that's too close. Too close. Too much. Techno's hands almost seem to be burning through the sleeves of his coat, and his skin tingles, as if there are sparks rushing across it.

"It is you, right?" Techno says. "Not—no, Ghostbur wouldn't, and—*wow*, I'm gonna need all of you to be quiet. Wait, so where's Ghostbur, then?"

The bitterness that washes over him is surprising. Perhaps it shouldn't be. Because it isn't surprising that Techno asked as much, and something in him, a snarling, angry thing, whispers, *of course, of course he would rather have Ghostbur than you, of course he'd rather the pathetic amnesiac remnant, the fragment of a soul that couldn't handle a single negative emotion, much less act on one, of fucking course that's the version of you that he likes most, what else did you expect?*

(of course he prefers the you that isn't broken, that doesn't lash out at anything and everything, even your own family)

"Gone," he says, short and clipped. "Or so I assume. Sorry to disappoint."

Techno has the nerve to look confused, his ears twitching. "What? No, that's not what I—" He stops, then, looking him up and down, his brow furrowing, and Wilbur is about two seconds from breaking out of his hold in the most violent manner possible, because it's too restraining and too *much*. "Wow. Okay. You are *not* dressed to be out here. C'mon."

"Do you really think I don't know that?" he gripes, but he doesn't resist as Techno tugs him indoors, biting back a gasp as the warm air surrounds him. He spares a cursory glance for the inside of Techno's house, but he knows the layout—Ghostbur was here often enough. "Why do you think I wanted to come inside in the first place?"

He's expecting a snarky comment back. It's an old song, an old dance that they do, built on sarcasm and quips and hiding all the feelings underneath. But Techno just looks at him again, looks at him like he's a puzzle, like he's something to be figured out, like he's something *unexpected*, and Wilbur hates it. Hates being under a microscope, scrutinized, and Techno is only one person, but he feels for all the world as though there are people all around him, looking at him, whispering, like he's on display, stuck in a glass cage for everyone to point at

"I, uh," Techno says, "really, that thing about Ghostbur? I was just wonderin'. It's not that I'm not happy to see you, Wilbur, honestly. I just... wasn't expecting it. Phil said that the whole resurrection thing, uh... didn't pan out."

... Right. That's a thing that happened. Ghostbur and his stupid determination, his stupid insistence that the server needed him back, needed him alive, and Wilbur wishes he could take Ghostbur by the collar of his sweater and shout at him until he got it through his head that Wilbur alive is the absolute last thing *anyone* needs.

"Yeah, that's not why I'm here," he says, and—Techno is *still* holding him, and it's weird, and he doesn't like it. His stomach is doing flips. It's too *much*, and it's especially too much coming from Technoblade of all people, because sustained contact has never been how

Techno shows affection, or much of anything else, for that matter, and the fact that he's doing it now is throwing Wilbur off balance.

So he steps away, further into the house, and it seems that this is finally enough for Techno to get the hint. His hands slip from his arms, and Wilbur pretends that he doesn't feel very cold all of a sudden, a cold that's different from the snow and ice of outside, a cold that starts inside and works its way out, and—

"Then why *are* you here?" Techno asks, and a smile pulls at Wilbur's lips, twisted and not at all happy.

"Ask Tommy," he replies. "Or better yet, ask Dream."

"Dream's in prison," Techno shoots back. "You're telling me he did something from a jail cell?"

"What, Tommy didn't tell you? It's the whole reason they kept him alive. To bring me back. Not that anyone bothered to consult me about it, but there you go."

It's interesting, watching Techno's face. He has never been outwardly expressive, has always presented a mask of stoicism to the world, but Wilbur knows him, knows what to look for, knows that the slight tightening around his eyes conveys anger, that the flick of his ears indicates discomfort, and a lot of it. What could be causing that, he wonders, feeling a grim sort of amusement. Is it the fact that Dream is alive? Or the fact that *he* is?

(which would he like it to be? he doesn't know. part of him wants Technoblade to be put off by him, he thinks. it proves that things are different. that things have changed from their shared childhood. that his experiences meant something, that they mattered, that they are remembered, that he has a *reason* to be the way that he is)

"Tommy hasn't been telling me much of anything, lately," Techno says, and Wilbur only just manages to pick up on the fact that his voice is too even, too monotone, even for him. "We're not exactly on speaking terms." He pauses, maybe waiting for Wilbur to say something, maybe not, but after a moment, he says, "You want a drink or somethin'?"

"That would be nice," he admits. His shivering has begin to abate, but his clothes are still very damp, and they're not doing anything to warm him up. He should probably ask for a change, but something in him balks at the idea. He doesn't want to ask Technoblade for favors. Doesn't want to owe him anything. He'll take what's offered, but that's all.

"Cool," Techno says. "I'll get on that."

They stare at each other. Nobody moves.

"Right," Techno says. "I'm just gonna... walk past you here."

Wilbur steps to the side, letting Techno pass him. He's close enough to touch, close enough to brush up against him if he were just a few inches to the left,

(and something in him is screaming for it, is longing for a gentle touch, for a touch that doesn't mean pain and doesn't mean war and isn't weighted with a thousand betrayals, but he doesn't know that he can find that here, so much blood is on the floor between them)

but he doesn't, and Techno disappears from sight. A moment later, there is a clatter, and the sound of cabinets opening and closing. Wilbur stands there for a moment longer, and then takes it as his cue to make himself comfortable.

Not too comfortable, of course. But he sits on Techno's couch and peels off his coat, and he immediately feels warmer as the air hits his bare arms. He stares at them for a moment, pale and unmarked, and it feels wrong, that they shouldn't be scarred. He can't remember if he ever took wounds there, but he's sure he did at some point, somewhere between the declaration of war and the battles and the explosions and the exile,

(because respawn brings people back, but it doesn't erase what happened, not completely, and it's always a tossup as to what will remain, what will linger on as a reminder)

and frankly, he feels like the ripped and torn state of his soul should show externally *somewhere*.

He breathes out, long and slow, and listens to Techno banging around his kitchen. He braces his forearms against his legs, clasping his hands together and lowering his head.

It might have been a mistake, coming here. He's not sure what he expected to find, but it wasn't quite this, wasn't quite a once-brother who seems to have no idea what to do with him, wasn't quite conversation that is awkward and stilted and strange because neither of them knows the other anymore, haven't since the festival, or perhaps since they reunited in Pogtopia, or perhaps since he and Tommy left home, or perhaps since *Techno* did, or perhaps they never knew each other at all, not really, and they were only playing house all that time.

(that can't be true, he knows, because he remembers the days when Techno taught him how to fight and he taught him basic guitar chords, remembers the days when he bandaged Tommy's scrapes and bruises and knew in turn that his little brother would do anything to defend him, remembers the days when the warmth and comfort of Phil's wings were only a step and a heartbeat away, and they were happy, they were, they *were*)

Absently, he brings one hand up to touch his chest. He thinks he's searching for his heartbeat, searching for a bit of reassurance, a bit of stability, but that's not what he gets. He can feel it even through his shirt, a knot of gnarled scar tissue, thick and raised against the rest of his skin. He slips his hand under his shirt to better prod at it, to map out its edges, and it should hurt, probably, but it doesn't. There's not much sensation there at all, a numbness that speaks to nerve endings that didn't quite heal right.

He knows what it is. He's not surprised that he brought it back with him.

"Um," Techno says, and he looks up. Techno is back, is standing in front of him with two steaming mugs, is openly fidgeting, obviously unnerved, and Wilbur might congratulate himself on it if the circumstances were any different. As it is, he takes his hand out from under his shirt and gives Techno a flat stare.

After a moment, Techno huffs and settles on the opposite end of the couch, offering him a mug. Wilbur accepts it, sniffs it, and the scent is familiar, but he can't place it. He takes a small, cautious sip and almost spits it back out, and not because it scalds his tongue, though it does. He knows what it is as soon as the flavor hits his taste buds, and for a split second, he is overwhelmed by

(tea in his hands and more on the kettle, his father's voice, low and soothing, and so much nostalgia that he chokes on it)

memories. It's been so long since he had this. So very, very long.

"Phil left some behind last time he was here," Techno says. Wilbur looks at him; he's regarding him carefully, as if he thinks he's going to—to do what? What does Techno think he's going to do? Yell? Attack? Bolt? All of those have their attractions, but he sits there instead, his mouth burning with the remnants of the heat.

He doesn't know what he's going to say when he opens his mouth.

"I haven't had this blend since before Tommy and I left home," he says, the words spilling out without his permission. "It was... the day before, I think? Sometime that week, at least. Phil and I sat in the kitchen and drank tea together, and he told me—" He cuts himself off; that's too personal. It hurts too much to think about, now.

(he looked into his eyes and said, *I'm proud of you, Wilbur*, and he tries not to think about it too much, because thinking about it too much means interposing that Phil's face, calm and smiling and happy, over the face of the Phil that he saw next, tears streaking down his cheeks and his expression twisted in desperation and grief as Wilbur begged him to—*stop don't go there not right now*)

"He's got his own base now," Techno says, "but he's not too far away. He said he might stop by tonight. You wanna stick around for that?"

Wilbur goes cold.

He hadn't really considered it, in all honesty, hadn't given due thought to seeing Phil, even though he knew very well that he would at least be in the area. Faced with the possibility, he's not sure what to do with it.

It's not what he's here for. That much is certain. He should try to keep from being distracted, probably. He needs to remember that he's not here with Techno out of familial obligation, but rather out of a desire to find information, to better know what he is about to be walking into.

"Maybe," he says. "We'll see." He takes another sip of his tea. Swallows. Gathers up all of his emotions, and locks them away in a box.

He's never been too good at compartmentalizing. But he can do it. It's necessary,

(when you're not even twenty-five years old and leading your little brother into a war)

sometimes.

“I was hoping you could tell me what’s been going on lately,” he says. “I want to go see Tommy, but I don’t want to walk in without knowing anything.”

Techno snorts.

“I figured it’d be something like that,” he says frankly, and Wilbur’s not quite sure how to take that. “I don’t know why you think I know anything. I don’t exactly have many friends over there right now.”

“Anything is better than nothing,” he responds, quiet and serious, meeting Techno’s eyes. He doesn’t quite know what expression he’s making, but it must be enough to persuade Technoblade, because Techno lets out a sigh, rolling his eyes.

And he talks.

He’s not lying; he doesn’t know much about the state of the server as it is now. But he knows some things, and Wilbur is interested in hearing them. Is interested in hearing about what Techno knows about the final battle against Dream. Is interested in what happened before, and what has happened since—there doesn’t seem to be a lot in the second category, thankfully, so perhaps Tommy has been able to enjoy some peace for once. Wilbur’s about to waltz in and destroy it, of course, but at least he had it for a time.

The exhaustion hits when Techno begins to talk about some kind of egg. Egg government. Egg cult? Techno doesn’t seem to know which it is, and Wilbur can’t make heads or tails of it, and it is then that he realizes that his eyelids are drooping. Which is not good; he didn’t intend to fall asleep here, and frankly, he’s not convinced that it would be safe to do so.

(lie)

But his body refuses to listen to his rational mind, and his thoughts are growing fuzzier by the minute, Techno’s voice falling further and further away. Still talking about the egg. It must be an important egg.

And then, the voice stops. Blearily, Wilbur lifts his head. He hadn’t realized that he’d begun to nod off. Techno is looking at him, something that can’t be softness in his eyes, something that can’t be fondness, because that affection was spent a long time ago, somewhere between Pogtopia and what came afterward.

“You still with me?” Techno asks.

He frowns. “Of course,” he tries to say, but the words come out slurred, just enough that he has no hope of hiding it or excusing it. Sure enough, Techno just laughs. At him. Which is rude and annoying.

“Sure,” he agrees, his voice making it clear that he is not actually agreeing at all. Before Wilbur can protest, he reaches over and plucks the mug from his hands. “I’ve got some guest rooms. Do you want me to set you up?”

“M not staying,” he says. Because he’s not. He’s made that determination just now. He’s gotten the information he needs out of Technoblade, and it’s time to move on. He doesn’t want to stay here,

(in a comfortable bed, safe under his brother’s watch, safe for the first time in forever, safe, safe, safe)

that’s for sure.

“Okay,” Techno says, and Wilbur is finding it increasingly difficult to think—and this exhaustion has hit fast, and that better be all that it is, because he doesn’t have the time to be sick—but he is still well aware that he is being mocked. “I’m gonna get you a bed ready, how’s that?”

“No, fuck you,” he mutters, but Techno is already gone, walking upstairs, chuckling to himself. Wilbur glares after him, trying to set him on fire with the force of his gaze, but it doesn’t work, and he is left alone in the room, on the couch, and it seems that he’s not going anywhere tonight. Not unless he takes this opportunity to leave, to venture back out into the cold with nothing but a trenchcoat that hasn’t even finished drying from his first expedition, and—

And this couch is comfortable, actually. Perhaps he can give himself permission to relax. Just this once.

He lies down. Curls up. It’s warm like this. Nice. His mind starts to drift.

He is vaguely aware of Techno’s return, sort-of cognizant of the way he stands over him for a few minutes before muttering to himself, too quiet for Wilbur to bother to parse the words out. Then, there is something covering him, soft and warm, and he must be tired to the point of hallucinations if he truly believes that Techno has just—what, tucked him in? That’s ridiculous. But it’s a problem for the morning.

There is a flash of blue in the corner of his eye. But he’s too out of it to pay it any mind.

Wilbur lets himself sleep.

He wakes up once, to the sound of a door opening, to the sound of voices, two of them, quiet and familiar. He doesn’t know what they’re saying. He doesn’t care. He’s safe here. That’s what matters.

Chapter End Notes

Every time Wilbur insults Ghostbur I cry a little bit on the inside. I adore Ghostbur. Unfortunately, Wilbur does not. I might possibly have some plans regarding that, though, so stay tuned :)

Next up, Chapter Three: In which Wilbur frankly has no idea how a reunion with his father is supposed to go, considering the circumstances. Also, the author has mentioned blue in the corner of his eye twice now, so it must be important, right?

listening for that angel choir

Chapter Notes

It'll be fine, I said. I'll be writing shorter chapters, I said. Maybe I'll even be able to update more than once a week, I said.

Guys, this chapter is over 6k. It's doubled the length of this fic. I'm such a fool. I should have expected this. So uh... not all chapters will be this long, because I simply can't sustain that, but it's definitely in the realm of possibility, I guess.

Also lol I'm glad y'all like Technosoft. Sure would be a shame if something angsty were to happen this chapter, huh.

Chapter content warnings include swearing, continued suicidal ideation, and a non-graphic panic attack.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He comes to awareness violently, lurching into a sitting position, his hand outstretched before him. He is silent, but that's probably only because he trained himself to be, back when they were so afraid of someone finding where they were, down in that dark, hidden ravine, stone on all sides and darkness above, closing in. He doesn't remember what he was dreaming about,

(fire all around and the world falling to pieces and it's all so very beautiful, and the worst thing is Tommy's horrified face but he's too far gone to care)

but the vestiges cling to him like cobwebs, difficult to shake off. He takes a moment to steady himself, to bring his breathing back under control, and then looks around, the remembrance of where he is coming swiftly. Technoblade's living room is unchanged from last night, but there is no sign of Technoblade himself.

There is, however, someone in the kitchen.

He can smell food—eggs, he thinks. There's someone moving around, their tread light and sure, and he knows those footsteps, knows them like he knows his own name.

He is standing before he can think better of it, and it is habit that keeps his own strides silent. He walks to the doorway of the kitchen and stops there, stops because there is a man at the stove, his back turned to him, but Wilbur doesn't need to see his face to know him. He never has.

Something about this picture is wrong, though, and he doesn't know what it is. He's seen this a thousand times, if not in this setting, has woken up to this exact thing on countless

occasions, back in their old home, back before Techno started going off to tournaments, before Tommy and he left to make their own ways, before Phil started spending more and more time on hardcore worlds, out of contact. Before all of that, it was just this, just Phil making them all breakfast in the sun-soaked morning.

Something about it is wrong, and he can't pick it out, and he can't stand here forever. He could leave, could turn his back and slip out the front door when no one is watching, but that won't be well-received, and he hardly wants to be followed. That really only gives him one other option, and it's ridiculous, how fast his heart is beating, because it's just *Phil*.

(it's just Phil, and that's the problem, isn't it? just Phil, and you can't face him, not after what he did, not after what you made him do)

It's just Phil.

So he leans against the doorway, and he clears his throat.

Phil whirls around, spatula raised.

(was he always on such a hair trigger? or is that new?)

He lowers it after a split second, his face flickering through several expressions too fast for Wilbur to process. Eventually, he settles on a warm smile, but there is something lurking around the edges, something that he is hiding, though Wilbur has no hope of figuring out what. For some reason, this doesn't feel like seeing Techno again at all. With Techno, it barely took a moment for old patterns to resurface, barely took a moment to remember how to read him, but with Phil, it's almost like looking at the face of a stranger.

(did you think he'd be the same? did you think he would be unaffected? even the most stable of anchors rusts eventually, exposed to the deep water)

"Wilbur!" Phil says, and he could weep to hear the sound of his voice, even though it hasn't been that long, not technically. Not that long since the last time Ghostbur spoke to him. "Good morning! Did you sleep alright?"

He thinks about his nightmares and decides not to say anything.

"Pretty alright," he says, and then adds, belatedly, "Good morning."

The words come out awkwardly. It's too casual, too normal, and everything that's happened since the last time they ate breakfast together is sitting in the air between them, about as unobtrusive as a flashing creeper and just as dangerous. There's too much left unsaid, and he has no idea how to go about fixing that.

So he just keeps standing there. Silently. And Phil stands there too, just as silent, just as watchful, just as awkward, and perhaps Wilbur should take comfort in the fact that he, too, seems to have no idea what to do. But he finds no room for comfort within himself, only a vague resentment, because wasn't Phil planning to bring him back anyway? Just what was his plan for afterward, if he had managed to succeed? Was it this? This silence, this hesitance,

this painful awareness of the distance between them, of all the things that went so bitterly, terribly wrong?

If this was his plan, Wilbur can't say that he's all that impressed with it.

But then, Phil steps forward. Only a bit, and slowly, as if he's approaching a startled animal. Wilbur would be angry at the implication if he didn't feel like he was one, if there weren't something snarling and desperate caged within his ribcage, calling for him to either fight or flee.

"Would it—" Phil starts, and then stops, and it's odd, because Wilbur doesn't remember his father ever being so hesitant. Phil's confidence has always been quiet, but at the same time unmistakable, and that makes this so very strange. "Would it be alright if I hugged you?" he goes on to say, and Wilbur's brain stutters to a halt.

He can't help but remember

(the spatula becomes a sword and his great creation is in ruins around him and he is laughing and sobbing and wild and everything is spiraling, spiraling, and what a glorious destruction it is, a beautiful chaos, and the center cannot hold and he is begging pleading shouting and there are tears streaming down his father's face and an awful waver in his voice, but the sword is in his chest and he can feel nothing but relief, relief, *relief, it's over now, you can rest, your symphony is not finished never finished but it is over at long last, good night, good night and goodbye*)

the last time Phil held him.

But that was then, and this is now,

(isn't it?)

and Phil is watching him with an expression that might be either desperation or hunger, masked behind a slight smile, and that is what drives him to nod, what drives him to open his arms slightly, and then Phil is embracing him, and—

The mess in his head goes quiet. Just for a second, his father is enough to drive his demons away.

And it's like fireworks on his skin, fireworks at first and then an all-encompassing warmth, and he doesn't fit into Phil's arms quite the same as he did when he was a child, is taller, older, cobbled-together pieces of the bright future he used to have, but something in him recognizes this feeling, recognizes it as safety, as comfort, as home. He slumps a bit, melting into the touch, and Phil doesn't complain at suddenly holding up half of his weight, just adjusts his position a bit and grips him tightly, like he thinks that Wilbur might disappear if he lets go.

"God, Wil," Phil murmurs. "I'm so glad you're home."

Wilbur closes his eyes against the words. He doesn't have the heart to tell Phil that he isn't. Even if for a moment, he can pretend. Pretend that this was his idea, that he's alright with this, that what he wishes more than anything else isn't to escape back into rest and away from this world that is too bright and too sharp and too laden with consequences.

"It's good to see you," he says instead, and that, at least, is mostly honest.

His hands are clutching the back of Phil's shirt, entangled in the fabric, and beneath his hands, he can feel Phil's wings shifting. It is then that he realizes what he didn't, earlier: Phil is hiding his wings, and *that* is what is wrong, because Phil never does that around the house. Never.

Though, come to think of it, Ghostbur never saw him with his wings out either. Not once.

Did Ghostbur ever question it? Did he ask and then forget about it, because the answer upset him? Or did he just not bother, presuming that Phil had his reasons and that everything was alright? That sounds like something Ghostbur would do, and for a moment, he is overwhelmed by a seething rage at his dead counterpart, because *why* couldn't he ever be useful—

(better to be useless and happy than alive and miserable and the cause of everyone else's misery to boot, better to forget than to remember, better to let it all go and float away in the wind with the dandelions and the blue blue sky)

"Are you alright?" Phil asks, and he realizes that he's balled his hands into fists. He pulls away from the hug, steps back to meet Phil's eyes, pretends that the sudden lack of contact doesn't leave him feeling bereft.

He tries for a smile. He doesn't think he manages very well. His skin feels as though it's stretching oddly, as though it's forgotten the proper shape for the expression.

"I'm fine," he says, and that—*that* is a lie. That is a lie for sure. But what else is he supposed to say?

The wings—or lack thereof—are bothering him. Now that he's spotted their absence, he can't unsee it. He's not sure how to ask, though, because he has the sneaking suspicion that

(he shielded you you idiot shielded you from your own explosion from your own destruction don't you remember don't you remember the way he cried out and the feathers in the air and he was holding you holding you don't you remember don't you remember how he tried to protect you even to the last don't you remember)

there's something about it that he's not understanding, still, and he hates this, hates not even being able to trust to his own recollections, but he supposes that's what he gets for his troubles. A beating heart and a mind full of holes and a wide open world that feels like a cage and a precarious stability that he thinks might go out from under him at any moment, like sand into a hidden ravine, and he'll be sent down, down, down—

“Oh, great,” Techno says, and Wilbur jerks, wheeling around. He hadn’t heard him—but then, Techno has always been able to move far more silently than ought to be possible for someone with such a terrifying presence, with such a weight to his blood-soaked step. “You guys are being weird, aren’t you?”

He blinks.

“What?”

“We’re not being weird, what are you on about?”

His voice overlaps with Phil’s, and it’s a bit weird.

Techno snorts, stepping further into the kitchen. “Don’t be weird in my house, you guys,” he says. “If you’ve gotta be weird, do it somewhere else. I can’t take this.”

“What, the great Technoblade can’t handle an awkward social situation?” he says, and there is more bite to his voice than he intends, and Techno hears it, judging by the way his lips twist into a scowl.

“You know I can’t,” he says. “I hate socializing.”

What should have been a joke has turned into something that is—not. Wilbur should have known better than to push, maybe, should have known better than to call Techno out, because Techno *does* hate socializing, *does* hate being forced into awkward situations, hates an enemy that he cannot defeat with his sword. But then, none of that is quite right either, because awkward social situations are one thing. This should be quite another. Because they’re family, or at least, they’re meant to be, and no amount of awkwardness should be able to outweigh that. And yet, here they are, Techno glaring and Phil quiet and Wilbur suppressing the urge to bolt from the room and start sprinting across the tundra.

Staying the night was a mistake. Not leaving when he could was a bigger one. He’s not sure what he was thinking.

(he does, he does know what he was thinking, and he was thinking that he wanted things to be the way they used to be, if he was going to be alive, if he was going to be forced to live in this world once again, he wanted a family that was strong and steady and whole, not the fractured mess that this is, not fragmented and separated and snapping at one another’s throats)

“I’m making breakfast,” Phil puts in. He seems so very weary. Wilbur’s not sure why he’s only picking up on that now, but the bags under his eyes could probably pass for bruises. “Techno, Wil, how about you sit down? The eggs’ll be off in just a few minutes.”

Techno huffs, shooting Wilbur one last glare. But then, he does as Phil asks, sidling past to sit at the dining table, the chair legs making an awful scraping sound against the floor.

Wilbur remains standing.

“C’mon, Wilbur, come sit down,” Techno says. “I want eggs.”

Something shifts. His blood is buzzing, like his veins have been replaced with live wires. It's a picture of domesticity, father making breakfast and son waiting for it, and he belonged here once but now he's a piece that doesn't fit, his edges worn away and grown out wrong.

(they shouldn't fit either, and it's wrong that they do, wrong that they're comfortable with this even when the picture is incomplete and Tommy isn't *here*)

"I'm not staying," he blurts out. He doesn't know he's going to say it until he does. And once he does, it's out there, and he can't take it back. But he doesn't think he would if he could. It's the truth, even if he's only just discovering it. He's not staying. He can't.

Phil has turned back to the stove, but Wilbur can see the way his back goes stiff, the way his shoulders hunch, just a little.

"It's breakfast," Techno says slowly, almost bewildered, if Techno did bewilderment. He doesn't, usually, but perhaps that's another thing that's changed sometime between Wilbur's death and now. "You can't stay for breakfast?"

"I can make something else, if you don't want eggs," Phil murmurs. Wilbur barely catches the words.

"It's not about the eggs and you know it," he snaps, and then stops to take a breath. Phil is silent. "Look, I wasn't even planning on being here as long as I have been. Where's Tommy?"

"At his old home, I think," Techno says. He is holding himself very still, watching Wilbur very carefully, and viciously, cruelly, Wilbur considers making the attack that he is so clearly expecting. Considers leaping across the table and going for his throat, rolling around on the ground like they did when they were kids, playing, roughhousing, sparring, only this wouldn't be any of those things. He wouldn't be able to defeat Technoblade, of course, but he'd be able to get a good few licks in, even if he doesn't have a real reason to do so,

(he wasn't there for Tommy he left Tommy alone left him to that monster's mercy he abandoned him and even when Tommy came to him he discarded him again tossed him aside as if they weren't raised together weren't brothers as if none of it meant anything at all he spawned withers in L'manberg and destroyed it destroyed it all destroyed even what it stood for and there won't be any coming back from that)

even if his rage is aimless, directionless, building in him like a volcano begging to erupt, begging to destroy everything in its path, to delight in the carnage and—

He's felt like this before. He's felt like this before, and it didn't end well, and it set the stage for all of Tommy's suffering, and if that's not a reason to try to hold back, he doesn't know what is.

"That's not what I was asking," he says through gritted teeth. "I'm asking you why he's not here. You don't see a problem with it?"

“We’re not on the best terms with Tommy at the moment,” Phil says quietly, and Wilbur wishes he would turn around so he could see his expression, but for now he’ll settle for glowering at his back.

(where was the father when his son needed him the most? not there, not there, never there, and what happened to the father who raised them, to the father who promised he would always be by their sides?)

“And whose fault is that?” he demands. “He’s a fucking kid, Phil! He needed someone in his corner, literally anyone, and I’m sorry, but the fucking amnesiac ghost couldn’t quite cut it!”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Phil asks. “Do you really think I don’t have any regrets? That I wouldn’t give anything to have him here, safe with us?” Phil wheels around, then, and usually, in times past, such a motion would be accompanied by a flaring of wings, an instinctive response, but there are no wings behind him, and without them he looks so very small. Once again, Wilbur is struck with that overwhelming sense of *wrongness*. “I know damn well that I failed him, Wil, that I failed all of you. You don’t need to tell me. I already know.”

“Phil, wait, no—” Techno starts, but Phil shakes his head.

“I have, Techno, don’t try to deny it. I’ve failed you all, and the worst bit is that even when I had chances to try to fix things, I didn’t take them. Haven’t taken them.” He meets Wilbur’s eyes. “All I can do about that is apologize. I am sorry, truly. But Tommy doesn’t want to see me. He’s made that clear, both after you died and after Techno and I destroyed L’Manberg. If you’ve got ideas, Wilbur, I’m open to them.”

And really, what is he supposed to say to that? His rage shrivels up, becoming something cold and hard and acrid on his tongue. Phil believes what he’s saying, that much is clear, and perhaps that’s the most disappointing thing of all, that he’s given up so easily, given up on keeping their family together.

(part of him understands. part of him understands that in the wake of everything, in the wake of his father murdering one of his sons and alienating the other, of course he would retreat to the third, to the one who was still there, to the one he thought he could still help. part of him understands the way that he clings to Techno, unwilling to lose, in his eyes, the only son he had left to him. part of him understands why Phil always takes Techno’s side)

(but part of him whispers, bitter and sharp, that Techno has always been the favorite. so was it ever really a choice, between Techno and Tommy? did he lose sleep over it, any time during the late watches of the night? or was he secure in his opinion that he’d done all that he could do, even though he never tried to do more?)

“I need to go,” he says, and braces himself for their renewed protests. But Techno is silent, and at length, Phil nods once, short and sharp.

“Will you be coming back?” he asks, and Wilbur gives the question due consideration.

“Maybe,” he says. “We’ll see.”

Phil closes his eyes. Nods again.

“Okay,” he says. “Please be safe.”

It’s as close to a blessing as he’s going to get, as close to an understanding as they will reach, and somehow, it sounds like more of an apology than anything else Phil has said. And if, for his own peace of mind, Wilbur has to pretend that he doesn’t hear how wrecked Phil sounds, how he seems to have aged another five years in the past five minutes, well.

“I’ll try,” he says, and he’s not sure whether he means it or not, and he thinks that if he stays here any longer, in this small kitchen with eggs on the stove and his father standing in front of him like he’s pronouncing a death sentence and his brother glaring balefully from one side, he will lose his resolve.

He’s angry, but he doesn’t want to hurt them. Not really. That compulsion is gone, it seems, washed away in the peace of the void, and only time will tell if it will return, now that he’s been ripped back into existence.

But in the end, hurting them is the thing he knows how to do best.

So he leaves. Nods once, sharply, turns on his heel, and walks toward the front door, grabbing his coat as he goes. It’s not in the same spot he left it in last night, is draped near the crackling fire, and there’s only two people who could have placed it there and Phil wasn’t there by the time he fell asleep, he knows, and his mind recalls the sensation of a blanket being draped over him. That is enough to get him to stop, to pause.

But not to stay.

The sunlight is cold, but he barely feels it at all.

He manages to make it out of the tundra before he breaks down.

He wasn’t expecting it, even though he probably should have been, but it doesn’t matter either way, because he blinks and he’s on the ground, hands braced against wet grass, heaving for breath because this is *so fucking fucked up*—

It was a mistake. Going to Technoblade was a mistake, because now he and Phil both know that he’s back and he just walked out on them and he’s so angry at them for so many things but now they’re probably angry right back and *when* the fuck did his family get so fucking broken? And now he’s here, in the forest again, and he’s all on his own

(but he’s not on his own and there are so many eyes watching him)

(he is on his own because there’s no one to stand with him, no one brave enough, no one who truly sees)

(he is on his own because he's pushed everyone else away and even at his lowest point there was a voice in the back of his mind screaming for him to stop to walk away to take a step back and gain some fucking perspective but there's no one *there* for him and it's all his fault)

(he is on his own even though Tommy is still there, despite everything, because even Tommy is wary of him now and that same voice tells him that he deserves it even as he denies it all and decries his little brother for a traitor)

(but he's *not on his own*)

and his empty stomach is rolling and he can't fucking manage to get a good breath in, and this might be how he dies again, and he doesn't think he would mind all that much if it was because he still doesn't want to be here, with all the cares and all the worries and all the responsibilities piling up on his back once again, and who the *fuck* thought this was a good idea? Who the absolute, ever-loving *fuck* took a look at what he did last time, took a look at how he cracked under the strain and blew up a city, and thought that it was a good idea to bring him back into the world?

In fairytales, when monsters die, no one brings them back. The victory is celebrated and the villain forgotten and their grave spat on. Wilbur never got a grave, but the principle should be the same.

He still can't breathe properly. He's gasping for air, but he can barely hear himself over the pounding of his heart in his ears. He might die here. He might die here, and he'd be mostly fine with that, if it weren't for—

Tommy.

It's probably Tommy's fault that he's here. Probably Tommy who—got Dream to resurrect him, and he really does need the details about that. But he still wants to see him, still wants to see his brother, and the original plan holds true. Find Tommy, then kill Dream, and maybe then he can think about his options. He can't allow himself to die here, even if he feels like he's going to, like his ribs are going to crack apart and his brain pound right out of his skull.

(and even besides all of that, what would Tommy think if he saw the message on his communicator, saw *WilburSoot died* without any context at all, without knowing that he was back in the first place?)

It's easier when there's someone there to help him. But he has no one, so he regulates his breathing himself, little by little, his progress set back every time a new wave of panic and desperation crests over him and makes him choke on air. But he does it. It's not pretty, but he does it, and after some time, he's kneeling in the grass, exhausted and wrung out and still here, for better or for worse.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “Fuck, fuck, fuck fuck!” Each one increases in volume, and by the last one, he's shouting. No one answers. He thinks he startles a few birds.

And then the forest is silent. He curls his fists into the grass, tearing up a few blades.

To the side, there is a flash of blue.

The hair on the back of his neck stands up.

(there's something he's forgetting)

"Who's there?" he calls, his voice rough and hoarse. "You've been following me, don't think I haven't noticed. Come out where I can see you!"

He gets no response, but he can't say that he was expecting one. He clambers to his feet, sighing sharply through his nose.

(there's something he's forgetting something was it something he said to Tommy what was it)

"Last warning," he says. "Come out. Or I'll make you."

It's an empty threat, said with more confidence than he feels. But he has to be right about this, has to be, or else he's been hallucinating, has been letting his paranoia get the best of him already, *again*, and if that's going to be the case, maybe Tommy really would be better off without him there, because he refuses to go down that same road now that he knows where it leads.

(even though part of him still yearns for it, yearns to go to hell and take everything with him)

(it was something he said to Tommy, in that moment when the veil between worlds was thin and he could see his brother there, plain as day, sitting on that bench with Tubbo at his side, and Tommy said Dream could bring him back and he said no fucking thank you and also that)

"Aw, you been pining for me, Wilbur?" someone says, and it all falls into place.

(he wasn't alone. he wasn't alone in the void. as much as he might have liked to be, as much as he liked to pretend otherwise. he wasn't alone. not then, and not)

He pivots, and uses the momentum to send his fist right into Schlatt's stupid, smug face.

And it passes right through him. It's a strange sensation, one that sends sparks of electricity up his arm and feels a bit like dozens of tiny firecrackers are going off. For a split second, there is a bit of resistance, and then a give that sends him stumbling forward, off balance.

"Did that make you feel better?" Schlatt asks.

"Fuck you," he snaps, stepping back. "What the fuck are you—what are you *wearing*?"

Wilbur doesn't think he's ever seen Schlatt wear anything but his signature suit and tie. Not since they were young, anyway, young and stupid and ready to take on the world,

(for each other, and where did that fall through?)

so painfully ignorant of everything to come. But the Schlatt in front of him is not the Schlatt he knows, not quite, is *off* in so many subtle ways and one big one. His pallor is grey, his

horns chipped and cracked, his hair mussed and disarrayed, but all of that is overshadowed by the oversized blue sweater, a horrible parody of Ghostbur's yellow one, and honestly, Wilbur wouldn't be surprised if that's exactly what it's meant to be.

"What, you don't like it?" Schlatt smiles, more a baring of teeth than anything else, and—his teeth didn't use to be so pointy, right? "I think it's a fashion statement. All the rage with ghosts these days." He steps back, and the movement is wrong; it's so obvious that his feet have no real traction on the ground, that he's moving in the same way that Wilbur remembers Ghostbur doing, willing himself into the new space rather than working dead muscles.

(funny, though, that Schlatt would at least pretend to walk, would at least pretend at some semblance of normalcy. Ghostbur almost never did, was always content to float around and disregard the unease he caused, to hand out blue and avoid any confrontation that might make him uncomfortable. but then, Ghostbur was completely happy to be the way that he was)

"You're an asshole," Wilbur grits out. "The fuck are you doing here?"

And just like that, the pretense is gone. Schlatt rises into the air, tilting forward, though he keeps his eyes level with Wilbur's, scowling ferociously. He's a bit transparent around the edges, Wilbur notes absently, a bit fuzzy, like he's dissolving into the air bit by bit.

"You think I want to be?" Schlatt says. "You think I wanna be here, Wilbur, really? I had all the booze I could possibly want and none of the pitfalls, and now I'm here, in this shitty world with all the shitty people I never wanted to see again, and I can't even fucking touch anything!"

His hand lashes out, and Wilbur flinches on instinct, but it passes through his shoulder harmlessly. There is the strange electric sensation again, but other than that, nothing.

"You think this is what I want?" he continues. "I'm fucking dead and I want to stay that way. None of this haunting bullshit. My business here is fucking finished. Over. Done. I don't want to be here." He pauses, and it's for effect, because he doesn't need to breathe, he's just a dramatic asshole. "And yet, whatever asshole dragged you back down here caught me too. I'm just as thrilled about it as you are, but I can't figure out how to get back. So that's a fucking, I don't know. Fucking karma, maybe. How've you been?"

Wilbur stares at him for a moment. He starts laughing before he can stop himself, hysterical gusts, torn from him like someone is reaching into his chest and squeezing his lungs out, and he doubles over, bracing himself against his knees.

"Oh my god," he eventually manages. "I don't wanna fucking be here either. This is so fucked."

Schlatt is silent for a moment, and the only sound is the last of Wilbur's laughter, dying down into desperate chuckles. It's not funny, not funny at all, but it's either laugh or have another breakdown, and he's filled his break down quota for the hour.

"I figured," Schlatt says, calmer now, quieter. He drifts back down so his feet at least appear to be touching the ground. "I figured, I knew you didn't want to—fuck." He runs his hand

through his hair and sighs, and once again, Wilbur is struck by the action. It's for effect, or perhaps it's just habit, but either way, the dead don't need to breathe. Can't, really, though they can go through the motions if they put the effort in.

"You're the worst and I hate you," he says, and there is absolutely no heat in it at all. "Why are you here?"

Schlatt looks at him incredulously. "I just said—"

"No, I mean *here*." He gestures. "With me. Unless you have to be, or something like that."

"Nah, I can walk away from you," Schlatt says wryly. "Believe me, that's the first thing I tried. But where the fuck else do you think I'm gonna go, Wilbur? You think I've got anybody waiting for me with open arms? That's ridiculous." He pauses. "Also, I'm pretty sure you're the only one who can see me. I did a little tap dance routine for Technoblade earlier and got absolutely nothing, so."

"*What?*"

"No, yeah, see? I can go invisible, like this, and hide from you," Schlatt says, completely ignoring what his question was actually about, the bastard. And then, he vanishes, like he was never—wait. No, he's still there, but Wilbur can only tell if he's not looking directly at him. And even then, it's just a faint shimmering, and an almost transparent splash of the color blue. "*I can tell I'm invisible when I do that. But when I do this—*" He reappears, his arms crossed— "no one else can see me. Except you, apparently. Make my fucking day, why don't you."

"Gladly," he replies automatically. "Wait, why is that even a thing?"

"You're asking me?" Schlatt demands. "How am I supposed to know? You're the one who was a ghost for months, you should know how this works!"

"I really don't," he says. "And besides, Ghostbur wasn't actually me. Just a fragment. A shadow."

"Real poetic," Schlatt mutters, and, well. Wilbur doesn't have much to say to that.

They stand there in silence for a moment. Or rather, Wilbur stands, and Schlatt drifts about half an inch off the ground, the soles of his shoes brushing the grass. He briefly considers whether attempting to punch him in the face again would be worth it or not, but dismisses the idea. Dismisses it a lot more easily than he should, actually.

"I feel like I'm not as angry with you as I definitely should be," he says.

"Well, I'm fucking pissed," Schlatt says, and then, after a moment, adds, "Not so much at you, though. I mean, I am. But not more than I am at the general everything. Do you remember much of the—the you know?"

He

(darkness all around and a howling emptiness but so much better than the world so much more peaceful and after a while the void felt like an embrace, felt like coming home)

(Schlatt was loud and irritating and the clink of his whiskey glasses made him want to kill him all over again but it was a break from the monotony and it was nice, sometimes, to have someone to talk to, someone who understood if only a little, someone with whom he didn't have to hide his shattered edges in favor of painting a prettier picture)

(empty and not and there is no death for the already-dead so the only thing to do is come to an understanding)

doesn't, not really, only recalls a general sense of peace, the rest that he so craved, attained at least. And he knows that Schlatt was there, too, knows it, but while he remembers talking to Tommy, that one time, he can't remember if he ever actually spoke to Schlatt. Evidence is pointing toward the affirmative, he thinks.

"Not much," he says. "Do you?"

"I remember it was better than here," Schlatt says. He kicks at the ground, and scowls when his foot won't make contact with anything substantial. "I had all the booze I could've wanted. Sure, none of it was real, but that didn't matter much. I'd kill to have a drink right now. Literally, I would murder someone."

"Good luck with that," he says.

"Shut the fuck your mouth."

"I'm planning on seeing Dream," he says, ignoring that. "After I find Tommy, anyway. I'll make him tell me what he did to bring me back. And you, too, I suppose, assuming it was the same thing. Why are you a ghost when I'm not?"

"You keep asking me these questions like you expect me to know the answers," Schlatt says. He levels his glare at him, but it doesn't look very angry. Just tired. Wilbur knows the feeling. "Ask him to send me back, how about? I don't want to fucking be here."

His eyes slip shut. "Neither do I," he says, and it's more of a confession than it has any right to be. His tone matches Schlatt's: tired, exhausted, weary, wrung out, *sick* of everything.

When he opens his eyes, Schlatt is gone. There is no sign of blue, no shimmer in the air. He's really gone, then, but he assumes he'll be back. For better or for worse.

He sighs, gathers himself, and resumes his march through the forest, looking for Tommy.

Haha I'm keeping this fic in Wilbur's pov so you guys don't get to see how Phil and Techno had a mutual breakdown after Wilbur left haha.

(Everyone gets some angst in this fic, I am an equal opportunity angst giver :))

Originally Ranboo was supposed to show up, but this chapter is just. Too long already. But memory boy will make an appearance at some point, I promise. Also, Schlatt is a joy to write, so I hope I did him justice. I love writing asshole characters, just, so much.

Thank you all so much for the kudos and comments so far, you guys are amazing! If you're liking this fic, feel free to comment! I absolutely love hearing what you think!

Next up, Chapter Four: In which Wilbur visits L'Manhole, has his first encounter with the blood vines (and doesn't think very much of them), and finally sees Tommy again.

head in the dust

Chapter Notes

Over 2.5k hits in three chapters, and I'm just ??? ??? Is this what it's like to write for an active fandom?? Seriously, though, thank you guys so much for all the support, it means the world!

This chapter is... only marginally shorter than the last one. Oops.

Content warnings for swearing and continued suicidal ideation.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

L'Manberg really is just a crater in the ground, now.

He knew, of course. Ghostbur saw it in the aftermath, in the aftermath of the TNT and the withers and Techno and Phil standing shoulder to shoulder with Dream, an unholy alliance that no one else stood a chance against.

(is he angry at them, for allying with Dream? he's done the same thing, and business is business no matter the devil you're dealing with, as long as you don't mind your soul being blackened)

(for Tommy's sake, there is anger. for anyone else's, well. he doesn't think he has a right to be indignant on their behalf, not about this, not unless he wants to add being the worst type of hypocrite to his stack of crimes)

But Ghostbur was focused on Friend, then, and not so much the ruin of everything else. It hits differently, to see it now, to see a crater in the ground filled with rubble and broken buildings, the remains of something that used to be more, that used to stand for something, that aspired to a symbol that it could never truly embody.

(not when it was built on a flawed foundation, traitors and child soldiers and a flight path too close to the sun)

Overhead, thunder rumbles. Distant, but there are clouds gathering.

The melody comes to his mind unbidden, lilting and soft. He hums a few bars experimentally. And then a few more, staring out over the wreckage, eyes tracing over the remains of structures that are both familiar and not. So little of his L'Manberg was left by the time Phil

and Techno destroyed it, and it is odd to recognize what it turned into, Ghostbur's memories at odds with the knowledge that he wasn't here to see it, was very much dead and at peace.

He keeps humming. There is a

(symphony)

song, the song, begging to be played, and he wishes he had his guitar. He's not sure where it is. He can't remember whether Ghostbur had it, whether it was left to be destroyed along with everything else. Or whether it was abandoned in Pogtopia, and there it still lies, gathering dust in an empty ravine with the remnants of the potato farms and the training rooms and the corridors they hollowed out and called their own.

The words won't come to his lips. He knows them intimately, like he knows his own name or perhaps even better, but he holds back.

Lightning forks through the sky. For a second, all the world is black and white, his vision painted with stark shadows. The clouds are darkening; the skies will open up any moment now. He feels a burst of fear, a burst of *get inside, get inside now, you'll melt*, and then remembers that he is not Ghostbur, and that a little bit of rain won't hurt him at all.

It is time to move on, though. Linger here will gain him nothing.

He looks out over what is left of L'Manberg one last time. And then turns on his heel and continues walking down the Prime Path, his coat flaring out behind him.

It feels so odd to be here, to be walking this road so openly. He hasn't seen anyone yet, and he probably has the oncoming storm to thank for it. And he is thankful; he's not sure how he would react if he ran into anyone, or how they would react to running into him. There are old friends here alongside old enemies, as well as people that he hasn't even met, not really, not properly, not as himself. Time's marched on without him, and if he's being honest, he doesn't know what to make of the changes that have happened in his absence.

He does know that he doesn't particularly want to see anyone. Anyone other than Tommy, that is. So he's glad that no one seems to be out and about.

He's lost in his own thoughts. So he doesn't notice the vines until he trips right over one, barely catching himself before he falls. He frowns, his humming dying in his throat as he stares at the obstacle.

This is definitely new. Did Ghostbur know anything about it? He can't remember whether or not he did, which is hardly a good indicator of anything. Either way, now that he's seen one, he sees a lot more, dotting the landscape all around him—and they were down in the crater too, weren't they? Thick vines, blood red in color, creeping across the ground and over buildings. They fill him with a sense of uneasiness; the way they grow reminds him of kudzu, covering things and choking the life from them, parasitic and nigh on impossible to get rid of.

He crouches by the one he tripped over, examining it. It's so large that a person would need an ax to make a dent in it, and frankly, he's surprised that no one has by now. At least in the

case of this one, which is definitely a hazard to anyone trying to use the Prime Path.

He reaches out and pokes it, not sure what he's expecting, and then his mind fills with

(a warmth, glowing and red and sickly and creeping and *wrong wrong wrong*)

(a warmth, glowing and red and comforting and familiar and *right right right*)

(s t a t i c and i t h u r t s)

He jerks his hand away, trying to shout, but the sound that escapes him is more of a whine. His momentum carries him backward, and he scrambles back a bit for good measure, his eyes fixed on the vine, half-expecting it to rise up and attack him or something of the like. It does not, but it takes a moment before he feels steady enough to stand, and even then, fine tremors run through his limbs, his body breaking out in a cold sweat.

What the *hell* was that?

He looks around, forgetting about his earlier trepidation, hoping that there is someone nearby to ask about it. But there is no one.

"Schlatt?" he calls, hating the shake in his voice. But there is no flash of blue, and no smug asshole stepping into view, so he assumes that the ghost isn't nearby at the moment.

He lets out a breath. Runs a hand through his hair. And he keeps walking, not sure what else to do. He still doesn't have any weapons, couldn't do anything about that—that *thing*, even if he tried. So he keeps walking, giving it a wide berth, and tries to calm himself down, tries to focus on seeing Tommy. Nothing is more important than that. Not the wreckage that was once his city, not the strange and slightly terrifying red vines, not the corner of his mind that is whispering for him to get out while he still can, to leave before he's well and truly trapped here, stuck in a new lease on life that he never wanted.

(rest rest rest if you want to rest again there's no one to stop you yet but this is your last chance)

None of that matters.

Tommy's house comes into sight a few minutes later, and he smiles to see it. In the end, it's not much more than a hole dug into a hill, but it's Tommy's, and that's always been what matters. He ducks inside, surveying the chests that line one wall, the doorway that leads to the room with the jukebox, a set of stairs leading downward. There's not much in the way of decoration, but Tommy has never been one for it.

Tommy's not here, though. The bed looks slept-in, and no dust gathers on the chests, so he's been here recently, which is a relief. He probably won't have to go hiking across the entire server looking for him. But he's not here, and Wilbur's not sure what to do while he's not. Should he wait in his home? Maybe. But then, he doesn't want to startle him too badly, and no one likes returning to their house and finding an unexpected guest, no matter who that guest might be.

He purses his lips, glancing around again. And this time, something tucked in the corner catches his eye. Its shape is familiar, and his heart leaps and stutters, but—no. It can't be.

(he doesn't remember whether Ghostbur had it or not but that shouldn't mean that Tommy does, shouldn't mean that Tommy managed to hold onto it all this time, between war and exile and war again, because that would be impossible, and even if it weren't *why* would he want to keep it for so long *why* would it matter so much to him)

But it is.

He lifts his guitar with hands that have begun to shake once again. Plucks a string. It's out of tune, but that can be fixed. It's a miracle that it's here in the first place.

He lets out a breath, thin and wavering. He looks around, at this home that is Tommy's, not his. It wouldn't feel right to wait here, not when he doesn't have permission, not when Tommy's not aware of him at all. So he steps outside, and takes a deep breath; the air is humid and electric, the anticipation of the rain permeating it already. The clouds have grown darker in the minutes he spent inside Tommy's home.

He takes his guitar and heads for the bench.

It's Tommy and Tubbo's bench, really. But with this instrument in his hands and rain about to fall, nostalgia is tapping out a three-four waltz in his chest. He sits gingerly, setting his guitar across his lap, his fingers already flying across the strings and frets, testing chords, turning the tuning pegs. It takes a few minutes before he's satisfied with the sound, and by then, a drizzle has begun to fall.

Briefly, he considers going back inside, or mining a few blocks and building an awning of sorts over the bench. But there's no point in it, really; he enchanted this guitar to *last* a long time ago, and a bit of water won't do a thing to it. And what can the rain possibly do to him now?

(he gasps back to life with mud between his fingers and rain in his eyes, and the water means imprisonment and freedom all at once, and something settles inside him, something that pulses with the pattern of the raindrops)

Thunder rolls. But the rain doesn't seem to be getting any worse than this light shower, so he strums a few chords experimentally. His fingers remember them better than he expected, because he's not sure when he last sat down and played, truly played. Before Pogtopia, at least, and with that thought, he picks out a familiar melody.

(i heard there was a)

He stops. Stares out into space. The view really is nice from here, vines notwithstanding, though he's sure it would look better in the light of the sun. Still, there is something about the rain that soothes him, fills in a few of the shattered cracks of his soul. He feels odd, distant, and he doesn't think it will last, but he'll take his moments of peace when he can find them, now.

He plays a different song. Something simple, something peppy. And then something else. He doesn't dip into his own songs, doesn't feel quite ready to do that

(though there is a song, a symphony, waiting just beyond his hearing, and if he lets them his fingers will *fly*)

yet, so he dips into the repertoire of songs that he knows, that he's learned over the years, nights spent around campfires and in forests and under trees and beneath the stars and by the crackling fireplace of the house he once called home, his brothers lounging nearby and calling his playing shit, his father laughing and chiding them and watching him with a gleam of pride in his eyes, his wings tucked behind him and at rest. All of them, at rest.

He doesn't sing. But he hums along. Quietly, at first, and then with more confidence. The sound of the rain fills his brain until it's just about all he can hear, the rain and his guitar and his humming, and it's as if the rest of the world has fallen away for a little while, leaving only him and this bench and the water that is slowly soaking his clothes and plastering his hair to his forehead, and this rain isn't at all like the rain from last night, really. That rain was cold and biting and it *hurt*, really, especially in those first few moments when his skin felt so raw, so new. This rain is gentle. Like a caress, almost.

He barely notices what he's playing. Until he settles on a song, and he is struck by the memory of playing it for Tommy when they were kids, trying to help him fall asleep. It always worked like a charm. Phil used to joke that it was a magic spell, or Tommy's off sequence, a hack into his code. And then Tommy would scowl and call him a bitch, and Phil would laugh, and Techno would roll his eyes and claim he wanted to leave, but he never did, not really.

(until he did, that is, until he left for Hypixel and the only thing any of them knew of him for a long while afterward was what they could glean from his short messages and the newspapers announcing his wins)

He tilts his head up for a moment. His eyes are watering, but it's the rain falling on his face. That's all. He keeps playing, playing and humming, and

(Tommy is drifting off, his eyes sliding shut before he gets through the song, and he lets the chord fade away and his *nah nah nah* trails into silence, and he smiles and ruffles his little brother's hair and whispers good night)

Tommy says, "What the hell?"

(take a sad song and make it better)

He hits a wrong note, his fingers spasming, and he flinches. He is suddenly very aware of himself, of the way his coat has begun sticking to him, of the water dripping down his face. The rain is coming down a bit harder now, hard enough that he perhaps should have made that awning after all. He swallows, his gaze fixed on his guitar, on the way the water evaporates when it makes contact with it, the enchantments still holding strong even after all this time.

The rain stops being a comfort. It's just rain, now, and he feels so terribly present in this moment.

He shifts on the bench, and turns so that he can look behind him.

And it's—

Tommy. And Tubbo, too, standing next to him. They've got an umbrella held between them. They're staring at him, Tubbo in shock and Tommy—Tommy in—he doesn't know, can't tell

(shock yes but what else he doesn't know is there excitement does he dare hope for happiness please let it not be horror please not anger even though he deserves it he does he knows he does)

what he's feeling beyond the obvious surprise, and perhaps a bit of disbelief.

His fingers finally still on the strings.

"Hello, Tommy," he says.

It's pithy, in the face of everything. It's weak. It's too little, too late. It's all he can think to say.

"What the hell," Tubbo is saying, an echo of Tommy's exclamation, "what the *hell*?" But Wilbur really only has eyes for Tommy, who is standing there, unmoving, unblinking, and worryingly mute. Tommy is never so silent. In the face of a challenge, in the face of something undesirable, in the face of anything unexpected, Tommy's first instinct has always been to be loud, to shout and yell and puff himself up like a bird playing at being predator. And yet here he is, quiet. Just staring. Eyes wide.

Slowly, Wilbur puts his guitar to the side, and stands. No more words come to his mind. Getting to his feet seems to take all of his energy, all of his willpower, and then he's glued to the spot. Frozen, his heart in his throat, beating out that traitorous rhythm. Tommy is still just *staring*, and he wishes he would do something, anything, would rail at him or curse or step forward or run the other direction, because anything would be better than this stalemate, this thick tension that rests between the two of them. Maybe then, Wilbur would be able to find the courage to bridge the gap.

(unless the gap doesn't want to be bridged and Tommy's changed his mind after all, has decided that he doesn't want the return of the man who made him a soldier and then a fugitive, who stole the remainder of his childhood away and replaced it with shadows and paranoia and enemies at every turn and the worst one of all right in front of him, who was supposed to be his brother but turned into a monster and who could blame him, really, if he decided that, if he decided that his life would be better off without such a one in it)

"Tommy—" he starts, not knowing what will come next, and his voice cracks. His voice breaks, terribly, like the word doesn't belong in his mouth anymore, like he doesn't have a right to say the name like he used to, and perhaps he doesn't, after everything he's done, and then—

“*Wilbur*,” Tommy whispers, barely audible over the rain.

“It’s me,” he says. It’s a confirmation and it’s a promise and it’s an apology. He wonders if Tommy can hear it.

And then, Tommy is running, is charging straight at him, and Wilbur doesn’t have time to react before Tommy is barreling into him, taking them both to the ground, and all the breath exits his lungs with a soft *whumph*. And then, there is a fist in his face, and he sees stars, pain erupting in his nose, and he grunts. His vision clears after a moment, and Tommy’s face fills his line of sight, red and splotchy and twisted up. He’s all but sitting on his chest, making it difficult to get that air back. His fist is still raised, still poised to strike again. Wilbur’s surprised that it hasn’t.

“You bastard,” Tommy says. “You *bastard*, what the actual hell is this, Wilbur you bastard, you can’t just—how are you even here? What are you—how are you—”

Wilbur reaches up and touches his face.

It’s an instinct, really, to touch Tommy when he gets worked up. He’s a bit like a cat, in that way; he’ll pretend until the cows come home that he doesn’t like physical comfort, that he’s too much of a big manly man to do anything more than slap someone on the shoulder, maybe, much less hug them, but as soon as contact is made, all of that flies out the window. If it’s timed right, that is, and Wilbur has had years to become a study in Tommy. So he reaches out and holds his hand against Tommy’s face, and half of it is to calm him down and half of it is for Wilbur to reassure himself that his brother is here, that he’s fine and that he’s real, because he didn’t think that it would be an issue but now that he’s here, looking at Tommy in the flesh, he can’t get the image of Tommy-in-exile out of his mind, worn down and ragged and eyes entirely devoid of life, at the end of his rope even if Ghostbur couldn’t see that, couldn’t understand the pain he was in.

(you should have been there for him should have been there to protect him to keep him safe but you weren’t and whose fault is that and now look at him he’s grown up without you when he shouldn’t have had to grow up at all)

Tommy goes completely still.

“Tommy,” he says. “I am so fucking sorry.”

It’s like a dam has burst within him, and everything he’s been holding back floods him. He looks at his brother, his brother who is still a child and yet looks at him with eyes that have seen more war and death than any child should, and he is struck with the knowledge that he is the one who did this, that he is the one who planted the seeds, that Tommy went to war with him, for him, and he repaid him by isolating him and hurting him and pitting him and Techno against each other and insisting that there was no one he could trust. And perhaps he’s no Dream, but what difference does that make, in the end, when Dream would never have been able to get his hands on Tommy in the first place if it weren’t for him, for his stupid, selfish actions, for his weakness and his inability to see reality for what it was?

He broke, and Tommy paid the price for it. And now here they are.

His vision blurs. It could be the rain. It could be.

“I am so sorry,” he repeats, and it’s a struggle to get the words out, because his throat feels so thick, like it’s closing in on itself. “So sorry for everything, for—god, Tommy, for all of it, I never should’ve—”

“You’re *here*,” Tommy says, and Wilbur falls silent as the air is once again driven out of his lungs, this time by the full weight of his brother collapsing on his chest and clutching at his shirt, burying his face in the fabric. “You’re here, you fucking—you’re *here*.”

“I’m here,” he agrees, and he brings one hand up to rest on Tommy’s back and starts carding the other one through his hair, a motion that Tommy usually protests, but now doesn’t say a word against.

“You bastard,” Tommy mumbles. “You’re such a bitch, you—you left me, you promised you wouldn’t and then you left me, what kind of shit move was that, huh? You absolute—you complete—you stupid bitch!”

“Gremlin child,” he murmurs, and it comes out so soft and so fond and more than a little bit choked up, “I know, I know, I’m so sorry.”

“You’d better be,” Tommy says. “Fuck, Wilbur, I’m so glad you’re back.”

And that gives him pause, just for a second, a moment in which he has no idea how to respond to that, because he isn’t. Not in the broadest sense. How can he be, when the thought of the void still lingers in the back of his mind like a siren’s call, when he’s been ripped away from that peace and shoved into a body that feels everything too sharply, too keenly?

He’s not glad for that.

(he’d escape, if he could, he thinks, but he can’t *afford* to think on it too long, can’t afford to let that longing settle into his skin, especially not now and not here)

But Tommy can’t know that. He decides it right then and there: Tommy can’t know that. He’s been through so much already; he shouldn’t have to deal with Wilbur’s shit on top of all of it. Shouldn’t have to know that he doesn’t want to be here at all. That he meant it when he told him he didn’t want to be brought back. That he still means it. That he’s not here by choice, no matter how good it is to see his brother again.

Tommy can’t know that. Tommy can’t know that, because it would hurt him, and Wilbur knows that he is not a good person, that he hasn’t been for a long time, but he’ll be damned before he hurts his little brother again.

So, Tommy can’t know.

It’s easier than it should be, to pull together a quick facade. A bit of a mask, a bit of a farce, a bit of a lie, just enough to give the impression that he’s less damaged than he knows he is. He can be broken in private. Tommy shouldn’t have to deal with that. Shouldn’t have to see it.

(he dragged Tommy down with him once)

(never again)

“Me too,” he says,

(and it’s a lie, a lie, a lie, twisted and poisonous on his tongue, tasting of ash and gunpowder) and smiles.

Tommy pulls away from him, enough to look him in the eyes. His face is blotchy, but Wilbur doesn’t comment on it.

“You’re not upset?” he demands.

“Why would I be upset?” he asks.

“I mean, earlier,” Tommy says. “You do remember that, right? When we talked? And you said you didn’t—you didn’t want to come back? I thought you’d be upset about it.”

“I remember,” he says. “It’s alright. I’m just glad to see you.”

(the question: how many half-truths can he tell?)

(the answer: as many as it takes, and never mind the fallout)

“Yeah?” Tommy says.

“Yeah,” Wilbur replies.

“Well then,” Tommy says, and then, he suddenly seems to realize the position that they’re in, Wilbur sprawled on the wet grass and Tommy half-lying, half-sitting on top of him. Tommy clears his throat, and his next motion is to awkwardly climb off of him, dusting off his pants and looking away awkwardly as if to pretend that none of that just happened. It’s typical, really; Tommy’s always been allergic to overt displays of affection. That much, at least, hasn’t changed.

He sighs, sitting up himself. And then finally remembers that Tubbo is here, too. Has been the whole time, standing there uncomfortably, white-knuckling his grip on the umbrella. He makes eye contact, and there, in Tubbo’s eyes, is the wariness that he was expecting to find in Tommy, that he was surprised not to see.

“Hello, Tubbo,” he says quietly.

“Hi, Wilbur,” Tubbo says. A bit short, a bit cold; not hostile, but not precisely welcoming, either.

“I owe you an apology as well,” he says. “A lot of them, really. I’m sorry for what I did.”

The expression that passes across Tubbo’s face is unmistakably one of surprise. Is it the apology itself? Or was he not expecting Wilbur to apologize to him, specifically?

“You’ll understand if I can’t quite forgive you,” Tubbo says, and Wilbur nods.

(Schlatt grinning on the stage and he knows, he *knows* that Techno will be unable to withstand this kind of pressure, knows that what Schlatt demands, he will be given, and there is a boy in a box shaking and begging, a boy that Wilbur has known since he followed Tommy home one day, all those years ago, a boy in a box, a sacrificial lamb, and Wilbur turns aside and doesn’t waver at the sound of his scream)

(but then, you had faith in your brother, a fool's faith, and it broke after that, it all broke, and down, down you fell, but what could you have done to prevent it, what weapon could you have wielded that would have saved the boy in the box?)

“Of course,” he says, and stands himself. The rain is letting up a bit, and he casts a glance back at his guitar, still sitting on the bench.

“Have you just been sat out here in the rain?” Tommy asks. “Why didn’t you just wait inside? How long have you been here, anyway?”

“Here? I don’t know. It hasn’t been too long,” he says absently. He picks up his guitar again, though he makes no move to play it, holding it loosely at his side. “I thought the rain felt nice.”

“You thought the rain felt *nice*—”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Wilbur,” Tubbo interrupts, “but how exactly are you back?”

And that—that draws him up short.

Because for the question to be asked like that implies that Tubbo doesn’t know, which means that whatever Tommy did, or got Dream to do, Tubbo wasn’t told. Which makes no sense; Tommy tells Tubbo everything. That’s just the way of the world. And when he looks to Tommy, Tommy is watching him with a curious expression, like he’s interested in the answer too, and that doesn’t make any sense, because Tommy had to have at least known that something had happened, because if he didn’t, that means—

(how many strings does the puppeteer have?)

“I thought,” he starts, and he can’t keep the dread from his voice, “I thought that I should be asking you that question. Since you said that Dream could resurrect me. I thought you got him to do something.”

There is silence for a very long time.

“I’ve been to visit a couple of times,” Tommy says quietly. “The prison, I mean. I hadn’t asked him about it yet. I’ve—I’ve been thinking about what you said a lot. And I wanted you back, so I was probably going to bring it up at some point, but I wanted to be—I wanted to try to be smart about it. I didn’t want the bastard to get one over me. And uh, that thing you said about Schlatt, I didn’t want that to happen, either. So uh, I haven’t actually spoken to Dream about it.”

“Wait, but that doesn’t make any sense,” Tubbo says. “Dream’s got a book, yeah? That Schlatt had? That’s how he knows how to do it, right? But he doesn’t have that in prison, so how could he have done anything?”

He tries not to let his reaction show on his face. But his eyes dart around, seeking out blue, trying to see if Schlatt is around to hear this. He doesn’t see anything, though that doesn’t necessarily say much.

Should he mention Schlatt? Or would that just make things worse?

“I woke up in a forest,” he says. “That’s literally all I know. I woke up in a forest, and it was fucking cold, and I was fucking alive. Beyond that, I’ve got nothing.” He pauses, gauging Tommy’s reaction, and decides to save Schlatt for another time. As well as the fact that he spent the night at Techno’s. All of that can wait until Tommy looks a little less—fragile isn’t quite the right word to use, or at least, it shouldn’t be, because Tommy has been many things but fragile has never been one of them. But there is a brittleness about him, and Wilbur can’t help but be afraid that if he says the wrong thing, if he steps wrongly, Tommy might snap. Might break into little pieces. Or might not, might fracture on the inside and pretend that nothing is wrong, might pull away and refuse to let anyone help him because he thinks he doesn’t need it, or worse, that he doesn’t deserve it—

“We’re going to have to go speak to him, aren’t we,” Tommy states, and yes, yes they are, Wilbur would love nothing more than to see the green bastard face to face and put his fist right through his teeth and wring out an explanation for himself, but—

Tommy’s eyes are hooded. He’s trying to hide it, trying not to let it show. But he’s tense. Like he’s expecting a blow.

(he rages, boils from the inside out, but he can do nothing because there is no one here to fight. no one here to blame. Dream is not here. Schlatt is not here)

(there is no one but himself)

“Yes,” Wilbur says, “but I don’t see why we’d need to right now. We can wait a bit.”

He doesn’t want to wait. He doesn’t want to wait at all. He wants to march down to the prison right now and demand his answers. But the poorly concealed relief on Tommy’s face makes it worth it.

(there is something in him screaming that it doesn’t matter, that this is more important, that Tommy can be a bit uncomfortable if it gets him what he wants, that there is a bigger picture to worry about and they are all ants caught up in a flood, but no, no, no, he sacrificed Tommy to this voice once and he won’t do it again he won’t he’s going to be *better*)

“Yeah, let’s make that bitch sweat for a while,” Tommy says, all bluster, but it’s comforting in its familiarity. “I bet he’s just waiting on us to come and ask him about it. Bitch has got another thing coming.” He grins, sharp and wild, and Wilbur almost takes a step back, because how long has it been since that expression was directed at him?

(the scene: the results are in and they've got a majority, and Tommy is whooping and hollering and Wilbur hates himself for giving him false hope, because he's got the results in his hand and they should have won but he's about to have to crush that infectious joy of his, and there's really no way to do it gently, so he waits just one more second, one more second for his brother to be happy, and then he speaks and the smile slides off Tommy's face like chalk washed away in the rain)

Too long.

So when he speaks, his voice is entirely too soft.

"I feel like I've missed a lot," he says, and it's an obvious non-sequitur but he doesn't care. "Would you like to catch me up?"

And Tommy grins and grins and grins, and he knows he's made the right choice when Tommy slings an arm around his shoulder and starts talking his ear off, and Tubbo rolls his eyes but follows along with them, and it feels so good and so right and he's missed this, he has. If life were made of only moments like these, perhaps he would be able to be happy to be here.

For now, being happy in the moment will have to be enough.

"So I've got to ask, you don't feel particularly like blowing anything up at the moment, do you?"

"Tubbo, that's so fucking rude—"

It stings, the reminder, but it's deserved. So he smiles, and he answers, and above them, the rain stops.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that sure ended nicely! I'm sure nothing bad at all is going to happen! They've definitely talked about everything they need to talk about, and avoiding their issues isn't at all going to come back to bite them!

:)

Also, the song that Wilbur was singing to Tommy is 'Hey Jude.' It was a big comfort song for me in my childhood, so I am possibly indulging just a little bit.

If you enjoyed, feel free to comment! Or just scream at me, that's fine too!

Next up, Chapter Five: In which they go and visit Dream in prison, and everyone is just as unhappy about it as you might think.

hide your soul out of his reach (i)

Chapter Notes

So, Tommy's stuck with Dream in prison, Ranboo's leaving coded messages in his inventory, he and Tubbo are platonically married, and Philza Minecraft is canonically centuries old. It sure has been a week, huh.

In light of all the lore stuff that's been happening lately, this seems like a good place to put a reminder that unless it shows up, you shouldn't assume that any events or lore drops from after the Jan. 20th finale are canon for this fic. (Except for c!Phil being functionally immortal bc that's exactly my brand of angst and I'm so using it.)

Also, you will probably notice that they... uh. Don't actually talk to Dream this chapter. That's because what used to be one chapter got turned into two, because it literally took them 4k words just to get to the cell, so. Go figure.

Content warnings for swearing, references to past child abuse (regarding c!Tommy).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You’re stalling.”

“I’m what?”

His response is automatic, comes spilling out before he truly registers that someone has spoken to him, much less who it is. So when he looks up and locks gazes with Schlatt, the annoyance bubbles up quickly. He’d been sitting quietly, in a relatively secluded area near Tommy’s house, thinking about nothing in particular and everything all at once, and he’d felt settled. Peaceful. His mind quiet.

So much for that.

“I thought you’d fucked off somewhere,” he says.

“And deprive you of my company?” Schlatt shoots back. “You wound me.”

“I wish I could,” he mutters. He glances away, staring off into middle space, hoping that maybe, Schlatt will go away if he pretends very hard that he doesn’t see him. No such luck, and he sighs. “What am I stalling about?”

“Dream,” Schlatt supplies. He strides closer, then kicks off into the air, drifting aimlessly in a seated position. The sweater still looks odd. Too soft, when the man in front of him is anything but. “You said you were gonna go see him.”

“And I am. Just not yet.”

Schlatt snorts. “What’s keeping you?”

He frowns. Meets Schlatt’s eyes again, and finds no sympathy there. A bit of hard amusement, at best. Not that he was expecting anything else.

“Tommy’s going to want to come with me, when I go,” he says. “But I don’t want him near Dream.”

Schlatt makes a sound that’s more mocking than understanding. “Right, Tommy,” he says. “Where is the kid? I’m surprised he left you alone in the first place.”

“Tubbo went back to his town. Snowchester, I think they said it was called.” There is an undefinable melancholy that fills him at the thought. Even now, after everything, they are still trying to make a home. Still trying to carve some corner out of the world and make it theirs. Or Tubbo is, at least. He’s no longer quite sure what Tommy wants. “Tommy went with him.”

“But you didn’t.”

He shakes his head. Tubbo said that there were other people who lived in Snowchester, when he asked. Jack Manifold, for one. Maybe a couple of others. Captain Puffy, maybe? Either way, to go with them would have been to invite the possibility of meeting people, and every cell in his body cringes away from that idea. He’s not ready for that just yet. If ever.

(you’ll have to face them eventually, will have to stand your ground against the hatred in their eyes, burning and so well-deserved, shattered fractals of a people you used to belong to and did your best to destroy)

(you’ll have to face them eventually, and yet you hide)

“Tommy said he’d be back later,” he says. “He doesn’t live there. In Snowchester.”

“So here you are, waiting for him.”

“I suppose.” He frowns, shifting in place where he’s sitting on the ground. He brushes his fingers against the grass, absently pulling up a flower or two. “It’s not as if there’s not time. We can wait until Tommy’s not quite so—” He trails off here, not quite sure how to finish the sentence. Not quite so what? Not quite so traumatized? Trauma doesn’t work like that, doesn’t go away within the span of a few days or weeks. He knows as much, though he used to be content enough to ignore it

(when he was the one causing it)

back in the old days, when there was no choice otherwise, when there was no chance of *rest*.

“Well, aren’t you considerate,” Schlatt says, and Wilbur looks at him sharply, because that was definitely snide. Schlatt stares right back, brows lifted, smirking. “Waiting for your little brother to be a little less broken. How kind of you.”

He bristles. “Don’t talk about him like that.”

“I’ll talk about him however I want,” Schlatt says. “What are you gonna do, shout at me? Play some shitty music? Please. But all I’m saying is that a few days isn’t gonna make a difference, and you know it. You’re stalling to make yourself feel better, to try and convince yourself that *you’re* better now, that you’re not gonna hurt him anymore.”

His mouth goes dry. “I’m not—” He shakes his head again, as if trying to dislodge the idea. “It doesn’t matter right now, anyway,” he says. “He’s in Snowchester. He’s not here. There’s nothing to do until he gets back.”

“Oh my god, just comm him,” Schlatt says. “Tell him you’re going over to the prison. Do it now, and you can leave before he decides to go with. Win win.”

“I don’t—” He furrows his brow. He doesn’t have his comm. He’s not sure where his comm is. Except—

For the first time, he thinks to check the pockets of his coat. The first couple turn up nothing, but then, in the third, his fingers wrap around a sheet of thin, hard plastic. He freezes for a moment, and then draws the communicator out, holding it loosely in his hand. A tap on the screen, and it lights up, just the way he’s used to.

It doesn’t make sense for him to have this.

Schlatt leans over his shoulder and whistles.

“Daddy’s worried about you,” he says, and Wilbur blinks, pulling up his unread messages. There shouldn’t be any, shouldn’t be any at all, because he can count the number of people who know that he’s back on one hand. And yet, there is one, and perhaps he shouldn’t be surprised at the identity of the sender, but he is.

Philza whispers to you: don’t mean to be pushy but could you let me know you made it to smp lands safe?

He has to read the message several times before its meaning sinks in, and once it does, he’s not sure how to feel about it. It doesn’t particularly read like Phil wrote it; it’s too hesitant, too apologetic. But Wilbur remembers what Phil looked like, standing in that kitchen, wingless and so very cautious, flinching away from his words as if they were physical blows. And in the end, letting him go, even though it was plain as day that he would have liked nothing more than to keep him there.

He’s angry with Phil. For a lot of reasons. But then, he’s angry at the world, too. Angry at himself, most of all.

(and there is so much of him that just wants someone else to swoop in and fix things, just wants his dad to make everything better in a way that he hasn’t since he was a kid and the first fracture formed, splitting their family apart, and as much as he is angry there is a large part of him that just wants to go back to that house and sink into his father’s arms and learn how to call a place home again)

“You gonna answer?” Schlatt asks.

He ignores him, checking the timestamp. It was sent a few hours after he left the tundra. So, a couple of days ago, now, and there have been no messages since. Perhaps it’s no longer relevant.

He hesitates, eyes tracing over *don’t mean to be pushy*.

It feels so strange, for Phil to qualify a sentence like that. Like he’s unsure of his welcome. And perhaps he’s right to be.

You whisper to Philza: I’m safe.

“Touching,” Schlatt says dryly. He scowls, trying to bat him on the arm or push him away or do *something*, but his hand goes through, and Schlatt just smirks some more for his efforts. “Now do Tommy.”

He puts the comm down on his lap, turning to face Schlatt fully. “Why are you being so fucking insistent?” he demands. “You’re a ghost, you can go by yourself. Through the walls and shit, since apparently you get actual ghost powers.” Ghostbur didn’t get ghost powers. He recalls that very clearly, because Ghostbur was immensely disappointed by this. For once, he agrees with the shade.

“And do what, look at him? Like it’s a fucking zoo? Watch him twiddle his thumbs and chuckle evilly to himself? Not exactly my idea of a good time,” Schlatt says. “I don’t know if you forgot, but nobody can see me. Hell, for all you know, I’m not even real. You could be making me up.”

He tries to brush the comment off. It hits just a bit too close to home

(whispers in shadows and enemies around every corner, people watching and staring and plotting against him, and no one else can see, Tommy can’t see, but that’s alright, he sees enough for both of them, and he will have his victory, and if he cannot have that, then nobody can and there is laughter, laughter, laughter)

for his comfort.

“If I were making you up,” he says, “I would simply stop.”

“Cute,” Schlatt says. “Do you wanna know what your problem is? Your problem is that you’re scared of people seeing you for what you really are.”

His hands clench.

“You say you don’t want to hurt Tommy? Fine. I even believe you,” Schlatt continues. “But don’t act like you’ve come back to life and suddenly you’re some saint. You’re fooling yourself, Wilbur. People like us don’t change. You can put on as much of a shine on the outside as you want, but scratch that paint off, and you’re still the power-hungry asshole who blew up a city as a hissy fit.”

His mouth works for a second, wordless.

“Fuck you,” he snarls, and scoops up his comm again.

You whisper to TommyInnit: I'd like to visit the prison today

“Was that so hard?” Schlatt asks.

“Fuck you,” he says again. “And fuck off. Or I swear to god I’ll figure out a way to exorcise you.”

“Please do,” Schlatt says. “I’d thank you for it. But sure, have it your way.” He shrugs, looking completely unconcerned. “I’m never too far.” Then, he disappears, and there is a shimmer of blue in the air, and even that fades away, and Wilbur is left alone and feeling no better for it.

“It wasn’t a fucking hissy fit,” he says to the empty space. There’s no one left to hear him, no one left to justify himself to, but

(it wasn’t a hissy fit it was desperation and fear and wild abandon and a surging, terrible victory and a fire in his chest driving him onward and he relished in it, relished in the freedom and the power and the control and he was the villain, he was the villain and he was good at it, he was the villain and he loved it, he was the villain and everyone else paid the price and he didn’t pay at all so what happens now, what happens to the villain back from the grave what *happens*)

he’s not wrong. Not about this.

TommyInnit whispers to you: ok

TommyInnit whispers to you: i'll be back soon

TommyInnit whispers to you: dont leave without me or your a bitch

He doesn’t leave without him.

He should. Should venture on to the prison by himself, to spare his brother the effort. But in the end, he can’t bring himself to do it. Can’t bring himself to go it alone. Perhaps it really is pathetic, but he wants to have someone by his side when he starts revealing himself to the rest of the server.

It’s certainly selfish. But he’s never claimed not to be.

They don’t meet anyone on the way. Wilbur doesn’t understand why, not when the sun is shining brightly and they’re walking the established path, matching each other stride for

stride,

(there was a time when he would have walked behind you, would have trailed on your coattails, would have looked to you for direction and guidance and look at him now, look at who he has been made into, a child who should not have to be as grown as he is but there is no changing it now and he really is someone to be proud of, isn't he?)

but they run into nobody, and those vines are fucking everywhere.

“Why hasn’t anyone cleared these?” he asks, more to himself than anyone else. “They’re a fucking eyesore.”

Tommy snorts. “You don’t need to tell me,” he says. “They’re ugly as hell. But there’s this Egg thing, see, that BadBoyHalo and a couple of others are all constantly going on about, and those vines come from it, I think. I don’t see what all the fuss is about, personally. I mean, it’s just an Egg. Can’t be all that great. But BadBoyHalo swears by it.” He pauses. “Well, he doesn’t swear. He says muffin by it, I suppose. Still can’t get him to swear.”

“An egg,” he says, and then frowns. “An Egg,” he repeats, and there’s a difference in the way he’s saying it, in the strange emphasis that implies the capital letter. “That’s—vines don’t come out of eggs. They’re not—vines don’t hatch, and eggs aren’t fucking plants.” And then, he remembers— “Techno told me about an egg. Said he thought it was some kind of cult. He didn’t know much else.”

Too late, he realizes what he’s said, and catches the way that Tommy stiffens.

“You’ve been to see Technoblade, then,” he says, and his voice is far too casual to actually be casual. He winces.

“When I—woke up,” he says, “I was really near the tundra. And I remembered where he lived, from when Ghostbur would visit. And I thought that maybe—”

“I mean, you don’t need to explain it,” Tommy interrupts, but his tone of voice tells Wilbur that actually, he really does need to explain it, because there is undoubtedly a note of hurt there, and that won’t do.

“No, no, I do,” he says. “I know you’re not exactly good with each other right now. I’m not really good with him either. But I woke up and it was raining and I didn’t know what the fuck was going on, and I made a list, see? And number one on that list was to get to you. But I was cold and wet and I had no idea what was happening in the SMP because Ghostbur’s memories are patchy as hell, so I thought that Techno could tell me some things so I wouldn’t go in blind and walk into—I don’t know, a nuclear war or something.”

Tommy makes an odd sound at that, like a cross between a cat having a hairball and someone choking on water gone down the wrong pipe. “Nuclear war,” he repeats, in a voice that’s a bit strangled, and his words seem to trip over each other in his rush to get them out. “Right. Yeah, no, none of that here. Nope. No way that could ever happen. Uh, yeah, no, that makes perfect sense.” He stops, and Wilbur is about to ask what the actual hell that was about, when he speaks up again. “Is he—I mean, how is he? Still a fucking crazy asshole?”

Wilbur looks at him. Tommy does not look back. In fact, he seems to be making a point of looking straight ahead, avoiding eye contact.

“Yeah,” he says softly. “Still an asshole. Same old Techno, you know him. Phil, too.”

He doesn't think he imagines the way Tommy's shoulders relax at that, just fractionally.

“Right, yeah,” he says. “Good to hear.”

“Tommy—” he starts, and is saved from having to figure out what he's going to say, because suddenly, he sees it. The prison. There's no way that it could be anything else. And he has to stop and stare for a long moment, because he's never seen a build like that before. Not on any server he's ever lived on. He's seen some impressive buildings in his life, and he'd like to think that he's made a few himself,

(walls to keep them safe to protect them and hold them dear and he hasn't seen Fundy yet, has he?)

but nothing compares to this.

“Who built this?” he breathes. He feels claustrophobic just looking at it, dark walls towering over them, looming, intimidating.

“Sam did,” Tommy says. “He's the warden, too. But Dream commissioned him, which is what makes it so fucking funny.”

He feels a grin spread across his face.

“Wait,” he says, “Dream's locked in his own fucking prison?”

“Dream's locked in his own fucking prison!” Tommy whoops, and just like that, he's laughing, and they both are, and maybe he can do this after all. He follows Tommy's footsteps as he leads him to the doorway, to an empty room with a portal frame, and he's sizing it up, trying to figure out how they're supposed to get through, when Tommy steps forward.

“Sam?” he calls out. “You here?” And then, to Wilbur: “Sam's kind of a dick when he's got the whole warden thing going on, but he's pretty nice when he's not working. He's been a good friend, you'll like him. Later, I mean. When he's not being a dick.” And then again: “Sam? Sam, we want to visit Dream!”

“You don't need to yell, Tommy. I'm right here,” someone says, and there is another person in the room, and every muscle in Wilbur's body tense because he didn't see him come in. “I wasn't expecting—” And then the man stops, staring right at Wilbur, and Wilbur is left to size him up and rack his brain as to whether or not he's formally met Awesamdude before. He's been on the server for a while, he knows. Was around for L'Manberg, was a part of the Badlands, was neutral. He's met him before. He's almost certain he's met him before. But there's no spark of recognition in him, looking at this man, with his full netherite armor and the mask covering the lower half of his face and the green patches that dot his skin.

“Wilbur Soot,” Sam eventually says. “I would assume? Not Ghostbur?”

He regains himself. Inclines his head. “You’d be right,” he says, and then he steps forward, taking his place at Tommy’s side, and he extends a hand. “Sorry, I’m not sure that we ever really got the chance to meet.”

Sam takes his hand, showing only a bit of hesitance. His grip is firm.

“I’d say it’s a pleasure,” Sam says. “I’m not sure if it is or not.”

“You know what?” Wilbur says. “That’s fair.”

“Hm,” Sam says, and it’s hardly approval. But Wilbur is very aware of the fact that they’re standing in the entrance of a prison, a prison that is supposedly inescapable, and that he has definitely, by the standards of the server, committed at least one crime. And what’s more than that, he doesn’t particularly regret it. Not the act itself. The effects it had, maybe. The pain it brought. But in his heart of hearts, he is glad that L’Manberg is gone.

So really, the fact that he isn’t being arrested is a win.

(he thinks, he wonders, what would he do if he was, if he was locked away in the dark and the walls loomed all around him and the sun was a distant memory and *ah*, he thinks, *no, I would rather die*, and then the imagined prison becomes Pogtopia, shadowy and dank and every sound echoing off the stone, melancholy and abandoned, and he wonders what it looks like now, now that there is no life in it at all, and he wonders if it is haunted with the ghost of who he used to be, if he left some important part of him behind to shrivel into dust)

“So, I assume this is a recent development?” Sam asks. He’s being very calm about this, which Wilbur appreciates. But then, they were never close. Were never connected personally. The real tests still lie ahead.

“Couple of days,” Tommy says cheerily. “We’re taking it slow.”

“I didn’t know you knew how to do that,” Sam says, and Wilbur blinks, because it’s a joke. Someone feels familiar enough with Tommy to make the comment, and likes him well enough to make it playful.

That’s—good? He thinks it’s good? Probably? Yes. Good. Tommy has friends. Good.

(he doesn’t need you. not really. he wants you, for some godforsaken reason. but he doesn’t need you)

“Oi, I can be slow,” Tommy says. “I can be the very slowest. I am excellent at being slow, I’ll have you know.”

“Well, that explains a lot,” Wilbur says, and Tommy gapes at him, looking back and forth between them with a dawning expression of betrayal.

“Oh no you don’t,” he says, stabbing a finger at both of them. “I didn’t introduce you so that you could go ganging up on me. That’s just not right. I changed my mind, Wilbur, you’re not

allowed to like Sam. None of this bullshit.”

Wilbur laughs, and for a moment, it’s like nothing has changed at all. He’s ribbing his little brother, and there’s even someone else here for support, and it’s not Techno, but that doesn’t seem to matter so much. The motions are familiar, the words an old pattern.

“You’re here to see Dream, right?” Sam says, and just like that, the illusion shatters. And the smile is gone from Tommy’s face.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, we are.” He hesitates. “We can both go in together, right? Because I’ll tell you right now, nothing else is going to work. We’re a package deal, me and Wil are.”

Sam tilts his head. “No one’s ever tried to visit with someone else,” he says. “I don’t see an issue with it, as long as you both pass security.”

This is relieving. But Wilbur’s a bit more concerned with the way that Tommy’s hands have begun to shake. Just slightly, barely enough to see.

“Good,” Tommy says. “Wilbur, there’s so much security, it’s honestly ridiculous. There’s a bunch of checkpoints and lava and you have to put all your stuff in a locker and get splashed with potions, and oh! There’s wavers, too, you’re going to have to sign a bunch of shit.”

“Great,” he says. It’s not great. It sounds nerve-wracking, in fact. But if Tommy can do it, so can he; he’s just a bit worried that Tommy can’t do it. Or rather, not that he can’t do it, since he’s done it before, apparently. Just that maybe, he really, really doesn’t want to do it. That maybe, it will not be very good for him to do it. That maybe, he’s putting himself through this for Wilbur’s sake, and hasn’t Wilbur just established that he doesn’t want to hurt Tommy anymore?

(but the past echoes forward into the future and there’s no way around it now)

But they’re here, and he’s not going to be able to get Tommy to turn back, and he’s not sure that he would even if he could, because his nerves are all shot and he doesn’t want to be in this dark prison without an ally. So Sam guides them through the checkpoints, and there are indeed a lot of wavers, and a lot of splash potions, and Tommy has to put all of his things in a locker. Wilbur pulls up his inventory, certain that he doesn’t have anything on him, still, but he’s not entirely right about that; he must have kept the flowers he was pulling up earlier, because he’s got about five cornflowers in one of the slots.

He puts them in a chest, and ignores the startled look that Tommy shoots him when he sees. He’s not sure what that’s about. They’re just flowers.

The walls are too close. The shadows too dark. The crackle of lava too near. Tommy is putting on a front, chatting *at* Sam more than he is *with* him, and to his credit, Sam puts up with it with easy acceptance. But Wilbur knows that a front is all it is, because his smiles don’t reach his eyes, and he knows how Tommy sounds when he’s talking for the sake of hearing his own voice.

This may, perhaps, be a mistake.

(you can't let him near Tommy don't let him near Tommy not after what he did to Tommy don't you know can't you remember how can you be letting this happen after what he did Tommy shouldn't be anywhere near here but now he is and you brought him and what kind of a brother are you)

But he has questions he needs to ask. And he hasn't forgotten his list. His goals.

If there is anything he can do on this server to make it better, after everything he's done, let it be this.

"Alright," Sam says, "call for me when you want to leave. Make sure to walk with the bridge."

And then the curtain of lava falls, and there is a moving platform, and Tommy is deathly still by his side, and there is the cell, and there, in the cell—

Dream.

He's wearing an orange jumpsuit. A prisoner's outfit. But he's kept his mask, stark-white and smiling and laced with spiderweb-thin cracks. His mouth is visible, canting upward into a slight smile, one that mimics the black paint. He stands at their approach, and then they're stepping into the cell, and Wilbur lets his hand land on Tommy's shoulder, to steady him and to steady himself.

"Oh, fuck," someone says, and it's not him, and it's not Tommy, and it's not Dream, and it sounds faint and far away. The living aren't the only ones in this cell, then. He hopes that Schlatt has the good sense not to be too distracting.

Dream takes a step forward. Under his hand, Tommy stiffens.

"Hi, Tommy," Dream says. "It's good to see you." It's directed at Tommy and Tommy alone, like Wilbur's not even there at all, Dream's mask tilted toward toward him, toward the kid that he manipulated and abused, and Tommy is trembling and Dream has *no fucking right* to address him like that, so soft and friendly, and Wilbur—

—sees red.

Chapter End Notes

Dream next week guys, I promise. Hopefully there were enough interesting character moments to make up for it. I will say that there was one line of dialogue this chapter that I'm setting up to come back in a big way down the road, and I'm very excited about it.

Also! I wanted to let you guys know that I've caved in and decided to make a tumblr sideblog for dsmp-related stuff. So you can now find me [here](#), [@onecanonlife](#)! Posting fic on tumblr is a bit like shouting into the void these days, but I also reblog stuff and

post reactions to streams every now and again, and any ficlets that I write that I decide aren't long enough to post on ao3 will end up over there as well. So feel free to stop by and hang out, or chat, or ask me things, or scream at me! Anything goes!

Thank you so much for the kudos and comments, you guys, I appreciate it so much!

Next up, Chapter Six: In which the conversation with Dream actually happens, and it goes about as well as could be expected.

hide your soul out of his reach (ii)

Chapter Notes

This week has been just. Too much. So, welcome to your weekly dose of canon divergence, where things still kind of suck but not like *that*, jfc

Also rip any hope of Tommy and Wilbur having a good relationship canonically lol. I am choosing to look away. I do not see it

Y'all really, really wanted to see Wilbur fight Dream, and honestly, mood. I hope this chapter is satisfying!

Content warnings for swearing, violence, blood, choking, attempted murder, and Dream's entire everything, so some manipulation and references to past abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Most people never think to guess that he is Technoblade's brother.

There is a reason for that, of course; they are both adopted, for one thing, and they look nothing alike, which is why he used to like to say that they were twins. It was always funny, to watch Techno roll his eyes and get all exasperated and try once again to explain to him that *that's not how twins work, Wilbur*, and it would always make him feel warm inside, because no matter his irritation, Techno never quite got around to saying that they're *not*.

But whether by blood or no, he is Technoblade's brother, and he has something of the Blade in him, something of his simmering rage, something of his inclination toward violence, the urge for blood howling in his soul, screaming at him to protect what is his.

And so.

"Hi, Tommy," Dream says. "It's good to see you," and Wilbur is moving without having given himself permission to do so, a wordless snarl curling in the back of his throat. For a moment, he forgets where he is, forgets what he's here for, forgets who he has at his side. His attention is focused on one thing and one thing only, and he launches himself forward, and the sudden sting in his knuckles as they impact porcelain is nothing in the face of the grunt that Dream lets out, surprised and pained. A *crack* rings through the room, and he withdraws his hand to see a new break in Dream's mask, a new fracture, and nothing is so satisfying as the knowledge that he put it there.

Dream is staggering back, seeking to regain his balance. Wilbur regards him for a moment, his head strangely clear, and then decides not to let him.

They go down in a heap, Dream's head bouncing off the hard obsidian floor with a gratifying *thunk*. Wilbur lands squarely on top of him, and his fist flies once, twice, three times. Into his mask, over and over, and the cracks widen, and the mask is *breaking*, and he wants to see it shattered, wants to see it come to pieces—

There is someone saying something, someone shouting. He's not paying attention. They can wait.

Because then, Dream starts to laugh.

And the thing about it is, it doesn't sound like what Wilbur *knows* his laugh is, that wheezing tea kettle noise that everyone always made fun of him for.

(gentle teasing, back in the old days, back when they were all friends, when this server was a safe place, a good community, back before it all went wrong, and perhaps he should wonder what happened to make *that* Dream into the monster that he is now, but he hurt Tommy and he *doesn't care*)

Instead, it's quiet and low and steady, and there is a smugness to it, a superiority even under the breathlessness, as if this is where he wants to be, as if everything is going according to plan, some plan of his, going right even though Wilbur is sitting on his chest and doing his level best to beat his face in, and—

How dare he have the nerve

(how dare he have the *nerve*)

to laugh

(to laugh when he's just destroyed everything around him)

after all that he's done

(and leveled the very thing that he fought so hard to reclaim *but if he cannot have it nobody can* and he laughs for the joy of it, the terrible, terrible joy)

to everyone, to the server, to *Tommy*?

He made a list, when he woke up. He made a list. And he's accomplished the first goal. He's found Tommy. And his mind is separating, splitting in half, and one half has control of his body and one is watching from the outside, and the one with his body takes his hands and puts them to Dream's throat. He can feel his pulse, rabbit-quick. His skin is warm to the touch.

He presses down, and Dream stops laughing.

The half of him that is watching begins to scream with a voice that sounds like his father's. Begins to shout, asks him,

(*can you kill a man in cold blood?*)

and the answer is

(yes)

because he knows what monsters are, knows that he has one pinned beneath him, and he knows that he is one too, and only a monster can kill another monster. He will suffocate the life from him, and the world will be better for it. He will suffocate the life from him, and Tommy will be safe.

It's one of the easiest decisions he's ever made.

But someone is still shouting, shouting words that enter one ear and rattle around in his skull and fade away without making any kind of sense, and he ignores them. Except then, he can't, because there are hands on his shoulders, hands trying to pull him back and away, and he resists them, doubles down, places more pressure on his stranglehold, because he wants Dream *gone* and he wants Dream *dead* and he's not going to stop until he's paid in full—

“—bur, *please!*”

But Tommy sounds scared.

Like a rubber band released, he comes back together again. His grip goes slack. He allows Tommy to pull him off.

“You can't—” Tommy is saying, is babbling, and he has tears in his eyes, and it doesn't make sense for him to be crying, because Dream was the one who hurt him, so he should want Dream gone, right? “Wil, you can't, you can't kill him, we need him, we need to talk to him, and he doesn't, he doesn't deserve to die, Wil, he doesn't, so you can't—”

“Doesn't he?” he asks, and is surprised by the hollowness of his own voice.

Tommy falls completely silent. For a long minute, the only sound in the cell is Dream wheezing, coughing, struggling for air.

“I don't know,” Tommy says, and he sounds so miserable that Wilbur regrets asking the question. “Maybe. I mean, I think about stabbing him every time I see him. But I—I don't want him dead, alright? He's in prison, and he can't hurt anyone anymore. So I don't want him to die.”

He hurt you, Wilbur doesn't say. He's still hurting you.

Because Tommy is pale and trembling, his hands shaking where they're still gripping Wilbur's shoulders. Because there is a waver in his voice that is wrong, that doesn't belong, that Wilbur has heard only a handful of times before. Because sometimes, Wilbur will look at him, and his eyes will be far too old, older than any sixteen-year-old's should be, and part of that is on him, he knows, he *knows*, but Dream is responsible for so much of the rest.

“I don't want him to die,” Tommy repeats, and Wilbur realizes that he's been silent for too long, that Tommy must have taken it as disagreement. “And I don't want you to kill him, okay? Not like—not like this.”

He's not entirely sure what that's supposed to mean.

He opens his mouth, and no sound comes out. So he clears his throat and tries again, and he's not sure why he's so hoarse, since he wasn't the one being strangled, but his voice is a croak.

"Fine," he says. "But you can't—if he so much as looks at you wrong, I'm not about to fucking hold back. You get that, right? I'm not letting him—I wasn't there when it counted. So I'm gonna make it count now. I'm doing my damndest to make it count now. So if he does anything, I'm not letting it go. I'm not letting him do shit."

Tommy's hands tighten. For a second, Wilbur thinks he sees tears in his eyes, but then he blinks, and they're gone, so perhaps it was his imagination. He has to think it was his imagination, because otherwise he's going to lose his mind. Because Tommy doesn't cry. Almost never cries. And if he cries now, it's either because Wilbur's fucked up massively, which is bad, or it's because Wilbur has done something right but it's overwhelming him because he's not *used* to things going right, which would be worse. So much worse.

"Okay," Tommy says. "Yeah. I—thanks, Wilbur."

"Not to interrupt," Schlatt says, and Wilbur flinches with his entire body. He'd forgotten that Schlatt was here, and now Tommy's looking at him in confusion, and now is not the time for this. Now is definitely not the time for this. Schlatt is over by the entrance, he thinks, but he doesn't dare turn to look. That's too obvious. "Because this is very touching and I'm real happy for you, but he's up again."

He draws in a breath. And looks past Tommy. Dream is on his feet.

He exhales.

"I won't kill you," he says, and his voice is far cooler, far steadier than he feels, "because Tommy doesn't want me to. That's it. That's what's keeping you alive right now." And he stands, and Tommy stands with him, shifting to be at his side rather than in front of him.

Dream inclines his head. "I get it," he says, and Wilbur feels a vicious spark of delight at how terrible he sounds. "Thank you, Tommy."

"Oh, shut up," Tommy snaps. "I'm not doing it for your sake. You great green bastard."

"It's been pretty boring since the last time you visited," Dream continues, as if he hadn't spoken, and if Wilbur couldn't hear the evidence in his voice, he would assume that the last few minutes hadn't happened, either. Since when was Dream this unflappable? That's not the Dream that he remembers.

(he remembers more than one Dream. he remembers the Dream who invited them to his server, who offered them a home and friends, who played war games with Tommy and Tubbo but was always so very gentle with them, who was considerate and funny and someone Wilbur was glad to call a friend. he remembers the Dream who fought against the independence of L'Manberg, cunning and bitter and angry and *loud* about it. he remembers the Dream who sided with Pogtopia, who always sounded as though he was smiling, laughing

at all of them, like they were all a great joke whose punchline had yet to be told. he remembers the Dream who gave him the TNT, who told him to blow them all sky high, and the way his blood sang in anticipation in return and Dream knew, then, he knew what Wilbur was planning, he could tell by that damn *smile*)

(Ghostbur remembers the Dream of Tommy's exile. but Ghostbur didn't know any better than to like him, and he can't trust memories that are colored by that)

"Tough shit," Tommy says, more confident now, and if he thinks he has the lead on this, Wilbur's content to let him take it. "We've got questions and you're going to answer them."

"What makes you think I have answers?" Dream asks, and—

Is he always this purposefully obtuse?

He glances at Tommy's face, takes in the frustration written there, the resignation. Apparently so.

"If you don't think you can help us, then we'll just leave," Tommy says, and it's an odd statement, but apparently, Tommy knows what he's doing, because Dream takes a step forward. Just one, though, and Wilbur would like to think that he knows better than to get any closer.

"I can help," he says. "I'm glad you came to me. What's the question?"

Silence falls for a moment. Tommy's eyebrows go up, and Wilbur chances a glance back at Schlatt. He's still hovering near the entrance, by the lava, and its glow permeates through his figure, a bit, rendering him translucent. His eyes are narrow, fixed on Dream.

At least he's taking it seriously.

"Right," Tommy says. "You're going to make me spell it out, then. You said you could bring back Wilbur. That's pretty much the whole reason why we left you with your third life. But, and I don't know if you noticed this, but here he is, see? So how the fuck did you do something from in here, or if it wasn't you, who the hell was it?"

"I did notice, actually," Dream says, more than a bit wryly. "Hi, Wilbur, by the way. Nice to see you again."

"I think that you should drown yourself in your sink," Wilbur replies with an easy smile.

"So, that's the question?" Dream says, ignoring him once again. "You want to know how I did it?"

"And why," Tommy puts in. "Why would be good to know too, since I didn't ask you to. You know."

"I do know," Dream agrees. "I have to say, I was kind of surprised at that. I thought you wanted your brother back?"

Tommy sputters. “Wha—of course I do! Did,” he tacks on, with a sidelong glance at Wilbur. “Uh, ‘cause I don’t have to anymore, because he’s here. Look, could we stay on track?”

“Sure, sure,” Dream says. “I mean, I’m not sure exactly how much I can tell you. Resurrection’s a tricky business, you know. Lots of moving parts. And you get it if I don’t want to give away all my secrets. Do you want anything to eat? I can’t give you much in the way of variety, but I thought I’d offer.”

There’s something about this that Wilbur doesn’t like.

“No, we don’t want your fucking—your fucking raw potatoes,” Tommy says. “That’s disgusting, and you are a sad, pathetic man because that’s all you have to eat. Wilbur, isn’t he a sad, pathetic man?”

He nods absently. He should be chiming in. He shouldn’t be making Tommy do all the work, shouldn’t be making Tommy confront Dream himself. But there is something creeping over his mind, a nameless dread, stealing his words. And under that, a realization, one that makes no sense at all but that he is increasingly certain is right.

“You’re saying that like I have a choice,” Dream protests, sounding so mild, so even-keel, and it’s *wrong*, there’s something *wrong* with this picture. “Potatoes is all I’m given. Maybe if you talked to Sam and got him to give me something else, but unless you do that, it’s potatoes all the way.”

“I’m not getting you things,” Tommy says. “We’re not friends. You need to stop talking like we’re friends. We’re not friends, I don’t like you, I don’t like who I am around you, and I’m not talking to Sam about your fucking potatoes, Jesus Christ.”

“I mean, okay, but you can’t complain about the food when I try to give you some—”

They keep bickering. Wilbur’s only paying half of his attention to the conversation, only enough to make sure Dream doesn’t try to pull anything too terrible. The rest of him is frantically working, thinking, trying to puzzle out why this is pinging as so very *off*.

“I’m a good businessman, Wilbur,” Schlatt mutters, and Wilbur jumps, because he is right by his ear, the fucking stealthy ghost bastard. “I know stall tactics when I see them.”

“He’s stalling?” he asks, and only realizes his mistake when both Tommy and Dream look at him. But Schlatt is right; Dream is stalling, has been going out of his way to change the subject and goad Tommy into an argument, and that means— “You’re stalling. You’ve got no fucking clue what’s going on, do you?”

Dream laughs. “Oh, come on now,” he starts, but Wilbur’s got his number now, and he’s not going to allow him space to breathe or to spin a lie.

“No,” he presses, “none of that. No potatoes, no fucking with Tommy’s head, no games. I’m not playing games. You would’ve been so quick to gloat, if you had been the one to do this. So quick to hold it over our heads. And even if you hadn’t, but you knew who did, you would’ve dangled that information in front of us like a, a fucking carrot on a stick. Instead

you're rambling about your food and trying to pick a fight. You didn't know I was alive until I stepped foot in this cell, did you?"

Dream is silent. His mouth is thin. There is a stream of blood slowly trickling out from under his mask.

"Holy shit," Tommy says. "Holy shit. You bastard."

"Well then," Wilbur says, "I think we're done here. Tommy, do you think we're done here?"

"Yeah," Tommy says, shaking his head. "Yeah, I think we are."

He turns to call out to Sam, to tell him that they're ready to leave, but there are footsteps, and he wheels around again to see that Dream has moved closer, far too close for his liking and far too close to Tommy.

(there is something)

"Okay, maybe I don't know why Wilbur's back," he says, "but don't you think that's concerning? It could've been anything, with any goals. I could help you figure it out."

Tommy winces, and Wilbur once again feels the urge to drive his fist into Dream's face, to put his hands around his neck and squeeze. He refrains, if only because of the look that it put on Tommy's face the last time, the fear it put in his voice.

(there is something very wrong)

"We don't need your help," Wilbur jumps in before Tommy can answer.

"Right, yeah, we don't—Sam! Sam, we're ready to go!" Tommy calls.

"You say that *now*," Dream says scornfully. For a second, Wilbur fears that he's going to try to come forward more, to make an attempt to get out when Sam comes for them. But instead, he stands where he is, crossing his arms. "I know things about this server that no one else does. You need me."

"We need you like we need a heart attack," Tommy snaps. Beside him, Schlatt mutters something inaudible.

"Maybe you do," Dream says, and then, inexplicably, his tone lightens. "I hope you visit again. I like seeing you. And this is the first time I've had so many visitors at once, so this was fun. We should do it another time."

"I think that you should shut up and stop talking now," Wilbur says, eyeing the lava as it continues to flow over the entrance. Is it taking too long? How many seconds has it been? Sam is there, isn't he?

"Well, you three are always welcome to come back," Dream says. "I'll be here. Unless I'm not."

Wilbur's blood runs cold.

(can you see it?)

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Tommy demands. "You've got nowhere else to go. You're going to be staying in here for the rest of your sorry fucking existence, and I'll come back here to tell you all about all the fun things you're missing out on because you decided to be a fucking dickhead toward all of the people that used to care about you. How's that, then?"

"As long as you visit," Dream says mildly. He's smiling. There is blood on his lips.

"He's looking at me," Schlatt whispers. "He's looking at me, Wilbur, oh god oh fuck he is looking right at me, how the fuck is he—"

Dream tilts his head. Schlatt cuts off, making a choked sound.

"I'm still the admin of this server," Dream says. "Putting me in a box doesn't change that. So if you've got more questions, I'm happy to answer them whenever." His smile broadens. "Not just about this, too. If the Egg ever starts being a problem, feel free to come to me. Not like I've got anything else to do."

Finally, *finally*, the lava curtain drops. Sam is standing on the other side, entirely too far away, and the platform is approaching, entirely too slowly. Wilbur feels locked in place, mind ringing out with *three, three, three*. He shouldn't know that. He should have no way to know that, admin or not. He shouldn't—so how does he—?

(look closer look closer do you see it do you see it do you see there's something wrong with)

"The Egg?" Tommy asks, and the platform is here. Tommy hesitates, clearly torn between staying and following this new line of questioning, and going. But then, he shakes his head vigorously. "No. No, we're not doing this. Goodbye, Dream." He strides out onto the platform.

Wilbur lingers a moment. Schlatt has disappeared.

Dream is staring at him. He can't see his eyes, but he knows, deep in his soul, that they are boring into his.

So he turns on his heel and joins Tommy on the platform. It begins to move, and he can't help the glance back over his shoulder. Dream is still there. Unmoving. And if he does make a motion, he doesn't do it until they are across, until the lava has dropped back down, masking him from sight.

The pressure in his chest lifts as they step outside. He sucks in a deep breath, relishing the fresh air in his lungs, air that is bright and clean and smells of grass rather than hard stone and the bitter heat of lava. The sun is bright in the sky, and he has to blink a few times to readjust to the light.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get what you wanted,” Sam says.

“He’s a dickhead,” Tommy says, oddly quiet. “Didn’t really expect much.”

“Well, I’ll let you know if he says anything to me,” Sam says, and then winces. “Anything relevant, anyway. He talks a lot.”

Tommy snorts, looking away. “Tell me about it,” he says, and his demeanor is definitely strange, subdued. He seems better, less fidgety than when they were inside, but still not at ease. “Or don’t, actually. I don’t want to hear about what that sick, sick man tells you.”

“Probably for the best,” Sam agrees, and then turns to him. “It was nice seeing you, Wilbur. Welcome back to life, I guess.”

There are a multitude of ways he could respond to that. *Thank you* would be easiest, would be what’s expected. Part of him wants to answer with something snarky, something sarcastic, something that reveals just how much he appreciates being here, but he won’t do that, not with Tommy standing right there. He’s trying to be positive. Trying to be better, trying to at least pretend to be happy. For him. He needs to keep to that, especially now, after whatever the fuck that was in there. So, *thank you* it is, then, and he opens his mouth to say it, except what actually comes out is, “He can’t get out of there, can he?”

Sam is silent for a long moment. His face does something that Wilbur can’t quite interpret, not with the mask covering half of it, but his eyes go a little wider, his brows a little more furrowed. It’s almost like understanding, or perhaps pity, and Wilbur doesn’t like either option. He doesn’t want to be understood, not really, doesn’t want people to think they understand him before he expressly allows them to, and he has no use for pity.

(villains are not meant for pity, and he still has Dream’s blood on his knuckles)

“No,” Sam says. “As long as I live, he will never set foot outside this prison.”

He says it with such conviction that Wilbur has to believe him. But somehow, it doesn’t set him much at ease. He can’t stop thinking about it, what Dream said, what he implied that he saw, the way he stared, motionless and intent and predatory, in a way, even though he was weaponless and armorless and subsisting off of raw potatoes. He should hold no power, be no threat, and yet, Wilbur can’t make himself relax.

“Alright. Thank you, Sam,” he says. Sam nods.

“Of course,” he says. And then, he’s stepping away, heading back into those dark walls, to that swirling portal that opens for none but who the warden wishes. And then, he is gone.

“Right then,” Tommy says, after a beat of silence. “Home?”

“Yeah,” he says, and feels exhaustion settle in, that constant companion.

So they do. They go home. They run into no one on the way, once again, and Tommy notices his confusion about it this time and tells him that no one truly lives in the area anymore, not since L’Manberg’s third and final destruction, and Tommy says it in such an offhand way that he doesn’t have a good response to it. Doesn’t have a good response to the way he seems to accept its loss, as if it was inevitable, only natural that everyone should have up and left the area, and it’s true that Wilbur wanted the nation gone but he never wanted Tommy to suffer for it, not really.

(though he didn’t care who suffered in the end, in that room covered in buttons, his anthem, that glorious song scraped into the walls, the music crescendoing with the explosion and then the ringing, blissful silence)

(no, he didn’t care who suffered, by the end)

He doesn’t know what to say, so he doesn’t say much, not until they’re back at Tommy’s house, the hole he dug out in the side of the hill and has made his own. He doesn’t know what to say, all of his old charisma failing him, so he watches Tommy for a little while as he knocks about his chests and goes to harvest a few carrots and rants about things that have been happening on the server lately, little things, minor things, things that conspicuously don’t involve Dream at all.

“Tommy,” he finally manages, “are you alright?”

Tommy stops where he is. “Course I am,” he says. “Wilbur, I’m a very big man, you know. It’s going to take more than one green bastard to unsettle TommyInnit.”

“It’s alright if he unsettles you,” he says. “Prime knows he unsettled the hell out of me.”

Tommy stares at him, and then looks away and into the chest he’s got open.

“Yeah,” he says, quieter this time, “I know.”

Wilbur waits.

“It’s just that—” Tommy says, “It’s just that I hate him, so much, and I hate what he does to me. He gets in my head so easily, even when I know to expect it. He’s so good at fucking with me, and I can’t stop him. And I tell myself, each time I go, that this’ll be the last time, this’ll be the time I put it all behind me, but then it’s a couple of weeks later and I go back again, because I think part of me misses him. How fucked up is that? I know exactly what he is, and part of me still wants to think he’s my friend.”

He says it all vehemently, but so very softly, like he’s trying not to hear it himself.

“It is fucked up,” he agrees, matching Tommy’s tone. “But that’s not your fault. It’s his.” He hesitates. “I’m sorry I made you go with me. I shouldn’t have.”

Tommy wheels on him, eyes suddenly blazing, and he slams the chest lid closed.

“You didn’t make me do shit,” he snaps. “Nobody makes me do shit. I do what I want. And I wouldn’t have felt any better if I knew that you were in there with him alone. Think that would’ve been worse, actually, so shut the fuck up about it.”

“I—” he starts, and then stops. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

He needs to be better about this. Needs to be better about remembering that Tommy is more than capable of making his own decisions. He is a child still, and ought to be protected, but he doesn’t need coddling, doesn’t need babying. There is a fine line between those things, and it is a difficult one to walk.

“Of course I’m right,” Tommy says. “I’m always incredibly correct. You should stop apologizing so much, though, it’s weird. Or wait, actually, do it some more, tell me all about how I am very right and you, Wilbur Soot, are very wrong and dumb.”

It’s an obvious ploy to lighten the mood. He can’t bring himself to go along with it.

“Why did you stop me?” he asks. “Actually, though. Not because he didn’t deserve it or some shit. That’s bullshit and you know it.”

Tommy scowls, his shoulders tensing.

“And what if I do?” he says. “Maybe he does deserve it. Doesn’t mean it should happen. I told you, I want to stab him really bad, but that doesn’t mean I do it. It wouldn’t be fair. Or very satisfying.” He crosses his arms, and for a moment, the image of him in the present is juxtaposed over a younger Tommy, in the exact same pose, arguing with Techno or Phil or him over some stupid, childish thing. Wilbur blinks, and the image is gone. “Besides, we did need him. To talk, that is, even if he turned out to be fucking useless.”

Alright, he can believe that.

(but he sounded so very scared, and)

“Did I scare you?” he blurts out. He regrets the words instantly, but he can’t take them back. “With what I did?”

He’s expecting Tommy to answer with a resounding denial, no matter what the truth actually is. He’s not expecting him to flinch.

(they are in that dark ravine and Tommy is conspiring with traitors and he’s screaming at him, half angry and half desperate to make him understand, to keep him on his side, to get him to see that they have each other and no one else, that no one else can be trusted, he’s screaming and he takes another step forward and he’s not expecting him to flinch)

“You didn’t see the look on your face,” Tommy says. “It reminded me—”

He cuts off, but Wilbur is capable of reading between the lines.

“I’m sorry,” he says, somewhat helplessly.

“You are better, right?” Tommy says. “I mean, really, you don’t—you don’t feel like you did back then, right?”

He’s trying to keep it casual, like it’s not a big deal, like he’s not desperately searching for the answer as to whether or not Wilbur is still insane.

(he didn't like the word then, didn't and still doesn't now, and how many times can a person be told something before he starts to wonder if it's true)

Wilbur’s heart is doing something strange. Something that hurts. Or perhaps that’s just guilt.

“I am,” he says, “I am, I swear. I just—I saw him, and I couldn’t hold back. I know that how I was—how I was then, I don’t understand how you don’t hate me for it, but I look back, and I know now. I do. I’m sor—”

“I don’t need you to apologize again,” Tommy cuts him off. “I—I am actually very fucking sick of apologies, I’ll have you know. But I never hated you, Wilbur. I was really angry, after you—after you went and *did* that, but I didn’t hate you, and then I was sad, and I just wanted you back. The real you. And I was upset and angry because I knew I could never have that. Except I do now, right?”

“You do,” Wilbur says, because there is no other way he could possibly respond to that. “I swear, you do.” And he opens his arms, and after a second of hesitation, Tommy comes over and sits on the bed next to him, and slumps into his embrace, and Wilbur holds him against his chest because it’s all he can do.

(all he can do to hold him like this and hide from him that the darkness is not gone, that there is something in him that still calls for the destruction of everything and everyone for no reason other than *why not*, something in him that wants to pour oil over the world and light the match and take himself along with it, something in him that has broken once and will do so again, at the slightest provocation, something as fragile as a sheet of glass already cracked or a bird’s wing once fractured from the fall and never healed right)

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there. I wish I had been,” he says, ignoring Tommy’s request for no more apologies, ignoring the fact that wishes and could-have-beens and what-ifs are useful to exactly nobody. “Ghostbur wasn’t exactly a great help, I know—”

“Oi,” Tommy says, pulling away to look him in the face, “don’t insult Ghostbur. He was doing the best he could. Maybe he didn’t really understand a lot, but he was there. Even when nobody else really was. He was—he was better than nothing, you know? He tried to make people happy. So don’t make fun of him.”

“Okay, okay, I won’t,” he says, and for some reason, thinks about the flowers he still has. He’s not sure why he kept them, why he bothered to retrieve them from the locker at all. But he did, and he has them, and they’re the only thing in his inventory at all. Cornflowers. Blue.

(*he tried to make people happy* but he failed, didn’t he, so how much could he possibly have mattered? he failed in a different way from Wilbur-when-living, but he failed all the same, and that is another thing they have in common, loathe though he is to admit it)

Tommy seems content with this, and he leans forward again with a sigh.

“We’re gonna have to go check out that Egg, aren’t we?” he mutters into Wilbur’s shirt.

“What makes you say that?”

“Dream mentioned it,” Tommy says. “I hate letting him yank me around. But he could be involved with it, maybe. Could be trying to—to hatch something, or something like that. I wouldn’t put it past him. So we’ve got to go see what the thing is all about.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that *you* have to do anything,” Wilbur says. “You deserve a break. You don’t have to play hero.”

“I’m not playing hero,” Tommy murmurs. “I am a big damn hero. Never really got a choice in that, did I?” He pulls back again, letting Wilbur get a good look at the way his eyes have begun to droop. It’s no wonder; it’s been an exhausting day, even if it’s only late afternoon. It’s a good thing, really, because that means he doesn’t quite notice the twisted expression that Wilbur is sure is on his face. “No, but there are people I want to protect. My friends. Like Tubbo. And Sam. So we should go see the Egg and make sure it’s not gonna hurt them.”

Wilbur looks at him, at this child who has gone through more than any child should and has come out the other side still standing, still determined to help his friends, still loyal to a fault, and he wonders how he could ever have suspected him of turning against him. How he ever could have managed to fuck up with him so badly.

“Okay,” he says softly. “We can go see the Egg.”

Never again, he thinks. I swear to you, I’m not fucking up again. And ignores the dread that’s pooling in his heart.

They’ll go visit the Egg. Assuage their curiosity. And then, finally, perhaps, some peace.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote most of Wilbur and Tommy's conversation the morning before the revival stream, so any parallels and direct refutations of things that c!Tommy said about what c!Wilbur is currently like in canon are coincidental. But I mean, I probably would've done it on purpose if I'd written it later. I just want them to be brothers, man...

My tumblr is [here](#)! Shorter ficlets that I write have a tendency not to migrate over to ao3, so if you'd be interested in drabbles that I've been writing in reaction to canon events, feel free to stop by! Or just to hang out!

Next up, Chapter Seven: In which, due to the fact that none of them really know what the Egg does, nobody considers that maybe putting it and Wilbur in the same room is a

bad idea. A very, very bad idea. Also, Ranboo puts in his first appearance, and that bit goes pretty okay.

feet in the fire

Chapter Notes

Are you guys ready... for the e g g?

Content warnings for swearing, minor violence, manipulation/mind control, blood, vomiting, and explicit suicidal thoughts.

Really, though, do mind those warnings. Shit's about to get a bit intense.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A new day dawns, as per usual.

Tommy and Tubbo are waiting for him when he steps outside, shielding his eyes against the sun. They've got their heads tilted together, discussing something in hushed tones, Tommy gesticulating wildly, and he takes a moment to stop and smile at them. It's just like when they were kids, the both of them getting into one mischief or another. Tommy was always the one to be blamed for it, but Wilbur knows better than to think that Tubbo doesn't instigate his own fair share of chaos. It's hidden better, but they're two peas in a pod, in the end.

"Should I be concerned?" he asks, the words coming easily. Today is a good day, he thinks. He feels good, better than he has since his return. The darkness has receded, and his heart almost feels light. He can almost forget about the scar that runs across it.

They both jump, heads swiveling toward him.

"Wilbur!" Tommy says, at the exact same time as Tubbo says, "Good morning!" He glances between the two of them, and feels his lips curl upward into a smile once again. It feels easy, to be smiling with them.

"As long as I'm not the victim," he says, and Tubbo shakes his head.

"No, no," he says, "see, we were thinking about the Egg, right? And how it's just, like, an egg. And we assume that it's red, because of all of the vines, but we've never seen it, so we don't actually know how big it is. I think that it's a great big egg, because all these vines are big and thick."

"And *I* think," Tommy interjects, "that there's no way that these vines are coming from the actual Egg itself, because vines don't hatch out of eggs. So I think that it's a regular-sized egg, and they've got it on a pedestal or something like that, or a, an egg throne. But it's gonna look so fucking stupid, because it's literally just a little egg, and we should smash it with something and see what they do about it."

He hesitates. “I’ve got to go with Tubbo on this one,” he says. “I don’t think it’s going to be a regular egg.”

“Psh, you don’t know,” Tommy says. “You’re dumb. Oh!” His face brightens. “I forgot, Tubbo brought you some things.”

He lifts an eyebrow and takes a few steps forward, and something in his chest warms at the way Tubbo doesn’t tense up like he did the first day, doesn’t flinch back. There is still wariness in his eyes, but he doesn’t think he’s mistaking the way that it’s lessened.

He hardly deserves it. But today is a good day, and he’ll take it for the moment.

“Yeah,” Tubbo says. “Tommy’s still dirt poor, so he asked me to do it, but here’s some gear. We thought you should have something.”

Tommy is sputtering at the description, but Tubbo ignores him. He opens up his inventory, and then takes out—gear. A couple of swords, shimmering with enchantments, a bow, an axe, a pickaxe. Wilbur feels something in him loosen just looking at them; he hadn’t realized how vulnerable he’d felt, being weaponless, and that’s probably a bit fucked up, actually. He didn’t always feel the need to keep a weapon on him at all times.

(you led child soldiers to battle when you were little more than a child yourself and can you really feel surprised, at the way the metal hums in your hand, now, the way your fingers are more secure wrapped around the hilt of a sword than the neck of your guitar?)

(you learned to play such different songs, the blood bright and accented in your eyes, every scream a crescendo)

He glances up, checking to be sure that Tubbo really does intend these for him. Tubbo nods, so he crouches down to inspect the weapons, now all laying on the grass.

“I’ve got armor too,” Tubbo says, “but I wasn’t sure that you’d want it.”

And doesn’t that carry a wealth of connotations, of memories? There is a sharpness to the words along with the question, and Wilbur

(my L’Manberg, my L’Manberg, a promise of safety you never could keep)

turns it over in his mind, poking at it.

“No armor, thank you,” he says. “I never did like it all that much. I’ll let you know if that changes. Thank you for these, though.” He gathers up the weapons, choosing a sword to wear at his waist and sliding the rest of them one by one into his inventory, and then glances up again to catalog their reactions. Tubbo seems to have expected the answer, but Tommy is frowning at him, and he has to wonder if he’s remembering something else, remembering

(the last time he refused armor, he was intending to die, had written himself off as lost, lost along with his symphony, the only possible redemption in the press of a button, the lighting of a match, and Tommy didn’t know it then but hindsight is twenty-twenty and Tommy has always been too smart for his own good)

the wars and what followed.

Tommy sees him looking, and his expression smooths over.

“Alright boys,” he crows, as if nothing at all had happened. “Egg time!”

Tubbo snorts. “Egg time,” he agrees, and Wilbur stands.

“Egg time,” he says, and then they’re off.

The day really is pleasant, a cool breeze blowing and not a cloud in the sky. Tommy and Tubbo fill the air with aimless chatter and bickering, and he chimes in sometimes and doesn’t even feel strange about doing so. This feels natural, feels right, and if he can have more days like this, days that put a spring in his step and a gentle tune in his ears, he thinks that being alive won’t be such a chore after all. Perhaps he can even learn to be thankful for it, well and truly.

He thinks that would be nice. To love life again. It’s a distant, glimmering possibility, but today it seems a bit nearer.

“It’s under Bad’s mansion, I think,” Tubbo is saying. “But they made another entrance, I’m pretty sure. Should be somewhere around—”

“Hey, Tubbo!” a voice calls. “Hey, Tommy!”

And it is a new voice. Not Tommy or Tubbo. Not Sam. A new voice, and that means a new person, and Wilbur can’t prevent the way all his muscles go taut, can’t prevent himself from fingering the hilt of his gifted sword. It’s partially a leftover instinct from the war and partially his own fear, his own aversion to being seen by anyone, to being forced into a confrontation.

He wasn’t always like this. He used to delight in speaking to people, or in a good debate, twisting his opponent’s words all around into Gordian knots until he has his victory. He’s not sure that that part of him will ever return, will ever fully recover from

(the world is against you and you are alone and you can trust no one for they will shake your hand with a smile in their eyes and stab you in the back as soon as you forget yourself and turn)

those dark days, the days that took his charisma and twisted it into spite and paranoia and manipulation. Words that once were sweet drip down bitter-sharp, or shrivel on his tongue before they can breathe at all.

“Huh—oh!” Tubbo says. “It’s just Ranboo, Wilbur, don’t worry. Ranboo!”

Tubbo can see his stress, then, and that’s bad enough. He doesn’t need anyone else bearing witness to it. But Tubbo is already calling out and waving, and there is someone approaching them from off to the side of the path, someone very, very tall, half their skin pitch black and the other half stark white, a small golden crown perched in their hair. And Wilbur thinks, *I*

have no fucking clue who this is, and a split second later, he thinks, *Oh, it's Ranboo*, and the cognitive dissonance threatens to overwhelm him before he figures out its source.

He has never met this guy in his life. But Ghostbur did. Ghostbur—liked him? He's fairly certain. Ghostbur liked everyone, of course, but they bonded, he's pretty sure. Over memory problems? Ranboo has memory problems? That seems right?

What a mess.

"Hi," Ranboo says. "Feels like it's been a while. Oh, hey Gho—ostbur?" His voice trails off on the last word, going up about an octave and a half, suddenly very uncertain.

What does he remember about Ranboo? Soft-spoken, he thinks. Kind. Generally pretty nervous. A sardonic sense of humor, if you can get to it, one that made Ghostbur laugh. That's all he can come up with. He was with Tubbo's L'Manberg, but he doesn't know what happened to him after—well. After.

He steps forward, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "Not really," he says. "Alivebur is more accurate." He pauses. "Please just call me Wilbur, though. It's nice to meet you. In the flesh, that is."

Ranboo's eyes widen. He's not making eye contact, fixing his gaze just to Wilbur's left instead, and—ah. That's right. Enderman.

"Wow," Ranboo says. "Uh, yeah! Nice to meet you too, I guess? Um, has this been a thing, or...?"

"Recent development," Tubbo says. "We're taking it slow."

He feels like he should object to that phrasing. It makes him sound a bit like he's... in their *care* or something like that, though he supposes that's not entirely inaccurate. He's hardly made strides to go and do anything by himself.

"Oh," Ranboo says. He pauses. "Well, that's cool. Do you know how?" He seems to regret the question immediately, holding his hands up in front of him, placating. "Not that you have to tell me or anything! But it's just, I was there when Phil tried to resurrect you that one time, I don't know if you remember. And it didn't really seem to work?"

"You're fine," he says. "We don't really know. We're rolling with it."

"That's fair," Ranboo says, and there is a moment of awkward silence. Wilbur can tell that he wants to ask something else, but he refrains, shifting nervously from foot to foot. "Um, so I was just at the spider spawner. Needed to fix some armor. What are you guys up to?"

"We want to see the Egg," Tommy says. "Have you seen the Egg, Ranboo?"

"The Egg?" Ranboo repeats. "You mean the one with the, uh—" He gestures around them, presumably at the vines that sprawl across the ground nearby. "No, I haven't seen it. I don't really want to, if I'm entirely honest. Kind of creepy, how people are fawning over it. I mean, it's just an egg. Presumably. So I'm not really interested in getting involved."

“We’re going to draw stuff all over it if it’s small,” Tommy says. “I’ve decided that just now.”

“Oh?” Ranboo says, and then doesn’t seem to know where to go with it.

“You could come with us if you wanted,” Tubbo says, but Ranboo shakes his head.

“Nah, I should be getting home. I have to feed Enderchest,” he says. “It was nice seeing you guys, though. And you, Wilbur. Um, welcome back to life, I guess?” He hesitates. “I gotta ask, does Phil know? Because we’re neighbors, and I was wondering if I should say anything about it or not.”

“You’re neighbors?” Wilbur asks, and looks at Ranboo in a new light. Young, anxious, in need of a secure place to stay once L’Manberg was destroyed—huh. That fits the bill. That fits the bill exactly. This is the type of kid that he can see Phil getting attached to.

(his heart’s always been too big for his own good, too soft despite all the years he’s lived, though he has to wonder why Ranboo is allowed a place and not Tommy, not the child he took in as his own years and years ago)

(it’s a matter of betrayal, perhaps, perceived on both sides, and which is right, he doesn’t know)

(he’s not going to tell Tommy that he’s not angry about L’Manberg’s destruction, because that might be a betrayal in and of itself)

“Huh,” he says, instead of voicing any of his thoughts aloud. “No, Phil knows, I’ve seen him. Him and Techno both.”

“Okay, good to know,” Ranboo says, and he really does look relieved. “Good luck with the Egg.”

“See you around, Ranboo,” Tubbo says. “You should stop by Snowchester sometime.”

“I’ll make sure to do that,” Ranboo says, and then with a slight wave and a bit of a smile, he’s walking off along the path. Wilbur stares after him for a moment, which is why he sees how he stops and pulls out a book after he’s gone a few dozen meters and begins rapidly scribbling in it.

His memory book. He remembers that.

“See, that wasn’t so bad,” Tubbo says. They start walking again, and then they leave the path and start crossing the grass. The vines become thicker, more frequent. Something about them fills him with a sense of unease. Probably their color; outside of the nether, nothing is quite that shade of red, a dark crimson that reminds him of nothing so much as blood. Not dried blood, not the color it gets when it’s caked on like rust,

(coating his sleeves and he didn’t clean them so the blood is still there and he can smell it and the sword is in his hand and the stains are never going to come out)

but rather, it's as if it's frozen in time, still glistening, ready to flow again when the force holding it back gives way.

"I remember Ranboo," he says absently. "Sort of. Ghostbur liked him. Though I guess that's not really an accomplishment."

And then, they're at a short structure built into the earth, a ladder leading down. He peers over the edge, and can just barely make out a pool of water at the bottom, intended to break a fall.

"The spawner's down there," Tubbo says. "But I'm pretty sure there's a tunnel that connects it to where the Egg is. Are we ready?"

"Of course we're ready," Tommy scoffs. He's grinning, bright and wild. It's the promise of adventure, Wilbur supposes, excitement without too much danger. Something new to discover, perhaps a new prank to play. His enthusiasm is infectious, but somehow, he can't bring himself to join in fully. The sun is still shining, but something heavy weighs on him now, something that he can't place. It's the vines, he thinks, their unsettling nature, and he can't bring himself to be sure that this will be without risk.

But Tommy's on the ladder. Tubbo's got one leg over the side, preparing to follow. There's nowhere to go but down.

They make it without incident, and the sound of at least a hundred spiders hits his ears as soon as his feet touch the ground. He winces, trying to ignore the skittering and shrieking, but it's impossible to do so entirely. But Tubbo is right—there are several tunnels leading out of this room, and there is a fuzzy red glow emanating from one of them. He exchanges glances with Tommy, who is still grinning, and with Tubbo, who has a smile on his face. Neither of them think this could go wrong, then. He should probably trust to that. He's been alive again for all of five days. They know the server better than he does, at the moment.

They descend. He keeps his hand near the hilt of his sword.

He wishes Schlatt were here, just a little bit. His presence would be irritating, but reassuring. Reassuring to have another adult here, little help though he would be. Reassuring to have someone who could make fun of the situation, distract him from his mounting sense of dread. But he hasn't seen Schlatt since yesterday, since he vanished from the prison, and he

(isn't worried, not one bit)

can't help but wonder where he is, what he's doing. It's not like anyone else can see him, not like he can touch anything. So how is he occupying his time?

It's warm down here.

The heat is stifling, humid, like a swamp, almost, but worse, because there are fumes as well, and that acrid scent that comes hand in hand with lava. As they enter the main chamber, it is easy enough to see why: there are patches of lava and molten rock all across the floor, and

vines hang down from the ceiling and cover nearly every square inch of space. The floor itself is obsidian, he notices. And there, in the corner—

It can only be the egg. He can't tell how tall it is, can barely see it though the clusters of vines dangling in front of him. But it is very large, and very red, and beside him, Tommy mutters a curse. Too big to vandalize quickly and hightail it out, but frankly, Wilbur feels as though that's the least of their problems.

"That *is* a big egg," Tubbo says. He sounds impressed.

"I've seen bigger," Tommy grumbles, stepping further into the room. He almost trips over one of the vines, and he shoots a scowl at his feet.

"No you have not," Tubbo says. "Where have you seen a bigger egg?"

"I—" Tommy stops. "C'mon, let's go look at it."

"No, no, I want to know where you've seen a bigger egg," Tubbo presses, even as they walk forward, picking their way through the room carefully. "Wilbur, back me up, where has Tommy seen a bigger egg?"

"Maybe he laid one," he replies, and that response makes no sense at all, but he can't be bothered to put in the effort. The closer they get, the more his mind is screaming at him

(get out get out get out)

that something isn't right about this, that they've made a mistake in coming down here, and there is a corner of his brain that is filling with static, buzzing and distracting and uncomfortable. And then they're standing right in front of it, and that feeling multiplies tenfold.

The Egg is several times his height and even wider across, and it is a shade of red that is unparalleled even by its vines. It is a shade of red that seems to move, that seems to scream, that seems to drip and ooze into the air. It almost looks as though it is made of blood itself, as if he could put out a hand and stick it right though, and he almost tries it before he balks at the idea, every instinct he has rejecting the urge.

No. This Egg is not for touching.

"I'm not sure I like this," Tubbo murmurs after a moment. His ears lie flat against his head.

"It's just an egg," Tommy says. "Don't be a pussy. Wil, what do you think?"

Wilbur opens his mouth and finds that he cannot reply.

"Do you think I could break a piece off?" Tommy asks. "Like a souvenir?"

"You shouldn't do that," someone says, and Wilbur jerks violently, his sword half unsheathed before he's given himself permission for the action.

BadBoyHalo. It's BadBoyHalo, only not, not Bad as Wilbur remembers him, because his face has taken on an ashen grey pallor, and his capillaries spread out like a web across his face, and they are the same white as his eyes. The same stark white, but somehow sickly, and blood shouldn't be that color, blood should not be *white*, and Bad's face itself looks gaunt and shadowed, half-starved, and his smile, once so kind and genial, is something predatory, something threatening. Bad is a demon, but he has never been a monster, and now Wilbur isn't so sure that there isn't a terrible thing peering at him out of those white, blank eyes, a terrible thing that isn't Bad at all.

Antfrost stands beside him, and Antfrost's eyes are red instead of blue.

"Hi Tommy, Tubbo," Bad says. His voice is chipper, pleasant, and yet— "Hi, Wilbur! I didn't realize that you were back! Have you come to see the Egg?"

Should Bad be this blasé about his appearance? He doesn't think so. They were never friends.

(and even his friends were not his friends, by the end)

"Yeah, we wanted to check it out," Tubbo says.

"That's great," Bad says. "Visitors are always welcome. It's a fantastic egg, isn't it?"

The question is searching, probing. He's looking for a specific answer. Wilbur thinks that it would be a bad idea to give him the wrong one.

"I mean, it's very big," Tommy says.

"It is, it is," Bad agrees, nodding amiably. "Are you liking it so far? I mean, are you having fun?"

Wilbur opens his mouth, intending to say *yes*, intending to say *it's the best egg in all the world*, intending to say anything and everything that Bad so clearly wants to hear if only it will get them out of here sooner. But his mind is filled with static and he is too slow to the mark, so it is Tommy that answers.

"It's fine, I guess," he says. "Your decorations are shit, though. It's too crowded down here. If I were a decorating expert, which I am, I'd say that you might try to clear some of this out, you know?"

"That's—an interesting suggestion, Tommy," Bad says, and his smile is much more strained. He doesn't bother to hide it. It's like a thin gash in his face. "I'll bear that in mind." He tilts his head. "I like it like this, though. I think it really gives life to the room. And we wouldn't want to do anything to hurt it."

"Hurt it?" Tommy repeats, and Wilbur's heart is suddenly in his throat, with no reason as to why. "It's a fucking egg."

Bad goes very still. Very still, and very quiet. Antfrost's eyes gleam, and his ears twitch.

“It’s a very good Egg,” Bad says. “Maybe you should listen to what it has to say. I bet it has something to offer you.”

That doesn’t—that doesn’t make any sense. Bad isn’t making any sense, and it’s a kind of nonsense that is unnerving, made worse by his apparent sincerity. Wilbur tries to reach out, tries to get Tommy’s attention, tries to get him close, but his arms won’t move. All of his limbs feel thick, heavy, and his head is spinning, airy and light and disconnected, and Bad and Ant are intimidating figures, suddenly, figures that stand between them and the exit. Wilbur thinks that perhaps, he should draw his sword. He doesn’t like the way that Bad is talking, doesn’t like the way that Ant is staring.

Instead, he turns his head to look at the Egg.

Tommy barks a laugh, loud and incredulous, and it’s like someone has driven a pickaxe through Wilbur’s skull. He moans faintly, but no one seems to notice. The room is swimming.

“Have you gone nutters?” Tommy asks. “It’s a fucking Egg. I don’t see a mouth on it anywhere. In fact, if it has a mouth, I don’t want to know about it, because that is fucking disgusting—”

“Actually,” Tubbo says quietly, “I think I can hear it.”

Tommy stops.

“You what?”

“You do?” Bad asks. He takes a step forward. Wilbur wants to take a step back. He doesn’t move. He’s looking at the Egg, and he can’t tear his gaze away, despite what’s happening in the corner of his eye, because there’s something just on the edge of his perception that he can’t—

“What is it saying to you?” Bad continues.

“It’s saying—” Tubbo’s face scrunches up. “Actually, I really don’t think I like this. I think we should go. What I can make out isn’t very polite.” His voice wavers, wobbles, like a spinning top running out of momentum.

“Really,” Bad says. His voice has gone flat. “I think you should stay and listen some more. It might grow on you.”

“Um, no,” Tommy says, “no, I think that’s a bad idea, actually. I don’t want to—is this some kind of cult? Are you a cult, BadBoyHalo? Is this Egg your cult leader? I think we should not listen to the Egg cult. This is weird. This is fucking weird. Tubbo, do you want to go? Let’s go.”

Tommy makes a motion. Wilbur can’t tell what. He’s looking at the Egg, and his vision is blurry. But he can see the way that Bad steps forward again, the way that Ant steps to the other side. Their netherite armor gleams. The message is clear: if they want to leave, they go

through them, and Wilbur can barely think past the way his head is pounding, but this was a bad idea. This was so clearly a bad idea.

Was this Dream's plan all along? Get them down here, get them into—whatever situation this is?

“Hold on just a minute,” Bad says. “I don't think you've given the Egg a fair chance. The Egg wants what's best for everyone, and that means you guys, too. How about you, Wilbur, do you like the Egg?”

He opens his mouth. No sound comes out. The room is swaying. The Egg is right there. He could touch it.

(static static static and beneath it there is)

Tommy is at his elbow, gripping his sleeve. “C'mon, big man, you feeling alright? You're looking awfully pale.” A moment, and then, “Wilbur? Wilbur? Tubbo, something's wrong with him. Come on, Wilbur, let's go.”

“Do you hear the Egg, Wilbur?” Bad asks, soft and steady, and his voice slices through the fog.

Because he—

He—

(glowing and red and creeping and comforting and sickly and familiar)

He hears it.

A whisper, trailing just on the borderline of audibility. A whisper, rasping and knife-edged, and it feels like a hand, like a hand is reaching into his brain, touching his mind, dragging its fingertips on his thoughts, and he is shaking, and he can't stop. It is a whisper, and he doesn't understand the words, but their meaning filters through to him all the same.

It whispers to him of fire. He can hear it crackling. He can hear it burning. He can feel it on his flesh, eating him, eating up his skin and his sinews and his bones until he is ash, ash mingling with the ash of his city. He is on fire and the fire hurts and it is a beautiful pain, a pain to revel in, a pain that he has chosen, a pain that has him grinning even as his lips burn away and bare his teeth, bare his skull, a permanent smile, a smile that means he's won. His fingers are clenched around the match, his fingers are caressing the button, his fingers are grasping the hilt of the sword as he forces Phil's arm to drive it forward. But it doesn't matter, because he is the fire and he is the ash, and he is eaten away and he eats everything else, a serpent consuming his own tail and screaming and laughing and choking all the while.

It whispers to him of fire. *You could burn the world, it says, and dance in the ruins, dance on the flickering spark-soaked wind, and it will be of you, their destruction, because if you cannot have it then no one deserves it so why not grant them the wreckage their betrayals have wrought?*

His blood sings with it, with the thrill of it, with the desperate, ugly longing for it, the beast that lives under his skin rising to the surface, and unlike the kraken it breathes and it lives and it howls.

“Wilbur?”

He comes back to himself, a bit, and finds that he is smiling in truth, his lips pulled back, his teeth on display.

“Wilbur?” Tommy says again. “Wilbur, we need to go.”

Tommy doesn’t understand. Tommy doesn’t hear it. Doesn’t hear the voice, doesn’t hear its promises, its wonderful, wonderful promises. But that’s alright. He will, in time, and until then, Wilbur can understand for the both of them.

“Everything’s going to be alright,” he tells him. “You’ll see. Can’t you hear it, Tommy? The world is on fire!”

He laughs, giddy. The room is spinning, and he with it, and his head throbs in time with his heart.

It whispers to him of a song.

A song, rife with drumbeats, thudding like the steps of a hundred armies, a million soldiers fighting and dying on the field. He was one of them, once, was Ares and led them all to blood. Blood, red and flowing, and what a lovely color it is. The blood is in the song, too, a *plink plink plink* of high staccato notes, a thrumming bass line that goes down in steps, a celebration

(no no no it’s a ground bass it’s a lament it’s a lament)

for the life spilling on the ground, for the life that is sacrificed, for the life that is fed to the cause, to the symphony, to the symphony! It understands his symphony, can sing in harmony with it! He’s gone so very long playing by himself, and yet here is something that knows the tune.

“No,” Tommy says, his voice shaking like a leaf on the breeze, “no, no, Wilbur, Wilbur, you’ve got to stop it, you’re scaring me, Wilbur, please—”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” he replies, because he must make it clear, must make Tommy understand. “The symphony’s still there, Tommy, can’t you *hear* it? It’s kept on without me, but I’m here now. I can continue it how I want.” He widens his smile. “I can leave it how I want. I can leave it unfinished again. I can make sure that no one finishes it.”

Tubbo makes a noise, like a small scream. Tommy is silent.

“The Egg can do it, Tommy,” he says. “The Egg can do it. All you have to do is listen. Please, Tommy, for me, can’t you hear it?”

Finally, finally, he wrenches his gaze away from the Egg. Bad and Ant have moved closer, Tommy and Tubbo farther away. Tommy's eyes are wide, and blue, and terrified.

(blue)

"No," Tommy answers. "No, Wilbur, I can't hear it. I don't want to hear it."

"We can fix that," Bad offers, and Wilbur turns his smile on him. "All you have to do is stay down here for a little while. How does that sound?"

"It sounds bad! It sounds very, very bad!" Tommy erupts. "We're not fucking staying down here, not when you've made Wilbur go all—" He gestures, and Wilbur doesn't understand what he's trying to say. He feels fine, feels real, feels *exultant*, and he'd thought such emotions lost to him, so shouldn't Tommy be happy for him? "We're leaving, and if you try to stop us, then I'll—fuck, I'll stab the fucking thing and crack it open, and you can be all weird and cultish over the yolk." As he says it, he pulls out a sword of his own, netherite and shining with enchantments, waving it wildly in the Egg's direction.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Tommy," Bad says, and then looks to Ant. "We'll remove the obstacle. Tubbo and Wilbur can stay here."

That sounds like a good idea. He'll stay here, and the Egg will give him everything it promised in exchange for his devotion. And Tubbo will learn, in time, to love it. It is unfortunate, about Tommy, but those who threaten the Egg must either be brought around or they must be disposed of,

(wait)

and Tommy is never inclined to listen after he's gotten an idea in his head. He's terribly stubborn like that. So if he's decided to oppose the Egg, there's only one thing left to do.

Wilbur draws his sword, and in unison with Bad and Ant, steps toward Tommy. Tubbo shouts a denial, fumbling for his own weapon, but Tommy just stands there, staring at him, a look on his face that

(is horror and betrayal and you promised to protect him promised you wouldn't hurt him anymore so what are you doing)

does something strange to his stomach, and—

The Egg is calling for his death, calling for his blood. But this—

This is Tommy. His little brother. He's striding toward his little brother with his sword in his hand, and this isn't—

The Egg whispers. Wilbur hears it. And it

(is going to hurt Tommy)

is going to hurt Tommy. He sees it in his mind: Tommy's limbs sprawled on the ground, Tommy's eyes gazing up sightlessly, Tommy's shirt wet with blood, Tommy dead and Tommy gone, and a wave of revulsion washes over him. Tubbo is moving forward, is moving to protect, but Ant engages him, and Bad is too close to Tommy, and Bad's sword is raised, is poised to strike, and Tommy reacts too late and he's not going to get his own sword up in time and the Egg is so loud and demanding and Wilbur can *hear* it but he doesn't want—

He catches Bad's blade on his own. Interposes himself between Bad and Tommy.

"Get the fuck away from him," he growls.

Bad's eyes widen.

"Don't you want to protect the Egg?" he asks, and Wilbur reels, because a large part of him wants to say *yes*, wants to say that he will give the Egg anything and everything it wants. But the problem is that there is another part of him, now, a part that puts Tommy's safety above all else, and that part of him is trembling and shaking and terrified, and the Egg doesn't feel like a soothing whisper but instead like a snarl, and there are still fingers in his brain but he can recognize them for what they are, for what they're doing, can recognize that they're fucking with his thoughts, yanking them around like a marionette on a string, and—

"Get out of my *head*," he cries out, and goes on the offensive, and Bad must be surprised, because he allows himself to be driven back. The Egg screams, and he screams, too, because it's loud and his head hurts so bad and part of him wants desperately to follow its commands and he feels as though he's being ripped in half.

(it's in his head *it's in his head* it's a violation it's scraping off his skin hollowing him out and putting itself inside and he doesn't want it doesn't want it he wants it out wants it out out *out*)

There is a clang, a clatter of armor, and Wilbur chances a glance back to see that Tubbo's gotten one up on Ant, somehow, and he's grabbed Tommy's hand and then Tommy's grabbing his, and they're all running. And Bad lets them go, sprints over to Ant instead, and they're going to get out, they're going to *get out*—

The Egg whispers to him of rest.

(it's in his head and it won't leave and it's like worms writhing under his skin but)

He digs his heels into the floor and turns back. Tommy is shouting something and Tubbo is shouting something and they're both pulling on his hands, but he won't let himself budge.

The Egg whispers to him of rest, tells him, *If you will not take the fire, then why not take the dark, they will be safe and unharmed without you there to burn them and you can find your peace again, that comforting nothingness that allowed you to drift, and*

(yes)

yes, he wants that, wants that so badly, because he was dragged back to life, dragged back into the world that cut him down to the quick, that formed all his sharp edges, and for

Tommy's sake, he can pretend, but he doesn't want to be here. And the red of the Egg is comforting again, its glow soothing and warm, and *All you have to do is give in*, it says to him, *all you have to do is let go and the peace is yours and who could blame you for taking it back when it was wrongfully wrested away from you?*

"Come on, Wilbur!" Tommy is shouting.

"It's offering me rest, Tommy," he says, and his voice is agonized. "It's offering—I want to rest, Tommy."

"Wha—no!" Tommy says, and from the shock in his voice, the horror, Wilbur knows that he understands exactly what he means. "No rest! You—you fucking promised, Wilbur, you told me that you were glad to be here!"

(it's in his head and it's using his mouth but it's only saying what he's been hiding, has brought these thoughts to the surface, to the light)

"I lied," he says. "Tommy, I want to rest. Please, let me go."

(his father stands in front of him, his sword in his hand, and his eyes are bewildered and hurt and confused and terrified, and he knows that with the way he is, it will only take a push for him to get what he wants, only a push to provoke his father into a reaction, and he is so very selfish but he is far past caring, because the symphony is unfinished and he is ready to go he is ready to go)

He looks at Tommy. Tommy is crying.

"Fuck you," Tommy snarls. "Fuck you, we're leaving, we're leaving right fucking now, Tubbo, help me—"

And they are pulling him back, pulling him back and away, but he is struggling, fighting them, because

(please let me go please let me go)

the red is so warm and so soothing and as long as it's not asking him to hurt Tommy, it's alright, really, and he wants this, he does, and all of his earlier thoughts about fingers and puppets have dissipated and he *wants* this, he's sure that he does, and Tommy and Tubbo aren't letting him, they aren't letting him go. And Ant is on his feet again, and he and Bad are advancing, and if he can just get to them, they will help him, they will understand—

And then everything gets very confusing. Because there is another voice, suddenly, one he doesn't recognize. More sounds of fighting, and he doesn't know who is fighting who, because the world is fading away around him, and his vision is just red. And then he's being manhandled, and he wants to keep struggling, but his limbs aren't responding, and someone is carrying him up a ladder, and then he's being set on the grass, and the nausea hits him hard and quick, and he's retching, bile coming up, and he's choking on it and he can't get any air —

And there are flashes. More nausea. His head pounding, like someone's tried to make a jigsaw puzzle out of his skull. Water, cool and refreshing, and the red subsides, but he hurts, hurts so very much.

Tommy's voice, yelling. A glimpse of Tommy's face. And then, Wilbur is out.

Chapter End Notes

Me, sprinkling in a Tennyson reference: I think I will make it obvious that I am an English major

No but really, I hope y'all liked this one, I wasn't super sure of how it came out. If you enjoyed, feel free to leave kudos or drop a comment, because the feedback I get is absolutely what gives me motivation to keep going! Comments are my lifeblood!

Also, [here is my tumblr](#) if you'd ever like to stop by!

Next up, Chapter Eight: In which Wilbur has a couple of very tough conversations, and he and Schlatt discover something... interesting.

but it gets hard to stand (i)

Chapter Notes

So.... how about that Quackity stream, huh? I am absolutely living for it but jfc that got really dark really fast. Catch me over here ignoring the terrible moral implications in favor of enjoying Quackity's superb villain vibes. Makes me wish he was gonna have a bigger part in this fic.

.... I'll probably write something for him eventually. Maybe not for this fic, but his character is too good to pass up.

Also lol I'm doing the thing where I split the chapters up again, because the next one is a direct continuation of this one, and I've also realized that this fic might have more chapters than I anticipated and I'm scared of running out of song lyrics.

Content warnings for swearing, panic attack, vomiting, past mind manipulation, and explicit discussion of suicidal thoughts/behaviors.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He is floating at the bottom of the ocean. It is dim and peaceful, and there is dappled light all around, shifting with the waters. He breathes, and fluid fills his lungs, but it moves as easily as if he were inhaling air. His hair floats in front of his face, gleaming white in the glints of sunlight. That should be strange, perhaps, but he feels so very calm. Nothing can reach him here. No care, no hurts. The water is holding him, and he is at rest.

But he is drifting upward.

The surface is approaching. The dimness recedes. There is light overhead, bright and warm, and he is moving toward it swiftly. Still, there is no cause for concern. He watches languidly, content to let it happen.

Is there a reason to fight it?

Surely not.

The waves break around him. He breathes in air. The sun is on his face.

He wakes up.

He lays there, still and quiet for a few moments before he musters the will to move. His breathing seems loud to his own ears, the only sound that he can make out. The roof above him is not one that is familiar—so, not Tommy's house, then, and he wonders why that is. His mind is blank, and he's sure there's something he's forgetting.

He rolls over and props himself up on his elbow. The lighting is dim, the torches flickering, the bare minimum placed to avoid mobs spawning inside. He's lying on a cot near the wall, and from his vantage, he can see an area with pews and a dull golden bell, and a towering pillar of water in the center of the space he's in. Recognition sparks after a few seconds; he's only been inside a few times, but he knows Church Prime when he sees it.

There is no one else here. He is alone. Is there a reason for that?

He stands on shaky legs and immediately regrets it as his head spins and pounds, like the worst hangover of his life. Drinking would explain the memory issue, but he's staying with Tommy, so that doesn't sound like something he would do. Even when he does indulge, he almost never drinks to the point of blacking out. So that doesn't make sense, but he's at a loss otherwise. He breathes in through his nose and out through his mouth, and as soon as he thinks he can move without toppling over, he makes his way over to the center of the room, tottering unsteadily.

From here, he can see the front door. Outside, it is night, the Prime Path illuminated in the darkness. Something about that is off, he thinks—wasn't it morning, the last thing he remembers?

The last thing he remembers—

He frowns, turning to the water, and absently, he runs his fingers through it. Cool and wet and gentle to the touch, and he remembers

(people around him people shouting and he can barely breathe and nausea rolls over him and his head is killing him and his mind is full of a red haze and he wants to go *he wants to go* but they're not letting him and there's water poured on him and forced down his throat and he nearly chokes but finally there is some kind of relief and it all falls away)

He freezes. Withdraws his hand from the water slowly, as if he's stuck his hand into a mass of thorns and has to pull back out without being pricked.

The Egg. They went to see the Egg.

And the Egg

(oh Prime what did you do)

reached inside of him and picked through his mind and his memories, offering him what he thought he wanted most

(took you and hollowed you out and tried to take the parts that might be redeemable and replace them with itself and make you its creature completely and utterly)

and he let it, let it inside with barely a fight, and he almost hurt Tommy. He almost killed Tommy.

He almost killed Tommy.

A breathy whine escapes him, and he slaps his hand over his mouth as he doubles over, resisting the urge to dry heave. He almost hurt Tommy, almost killed Tommy, and all because he allowed a fucking Egg to whisper to him, because he allowed himself to be taken in and taken over, and he's lucky, really, that he was able to snap out of it. It's horrifying to think about, that he might have killed Tommy at the Egg's direction, killed Tommy and felt *triumph* over it.

It was in his *head*.

He loses the battle against his nausea. His knees hit the floor, and he is wracked with dry heaving. There's nothing in his stomach to come up. It just hurts. His breath hitches, air coming in fits and bursts, and whimpers and moans escape his throat at quick intervals, noises that are wounded and animalistic, but he doesn't think he could hold them back if he tried. He's crying, too, but that's a given. There's no one here to see, at least. No one here to see his shame, his weakness.

The Egg whispered to him of fire, and he wanted it. The Egg whispered to him of fire, and that's all it needed to do before he embraced it with open arms.

The Egg whispered to him of rest, and he did it again. And Tommy was there. Tommy was there for all of it, and now Tommy knows that it's all a front, a lie, a sham, and the miserable creature that got shoved back into this body is nothing like the older brother he wanted, nothing like the older brother he deserves. Scratch the paint off, and what is there but wreckage?

He hunches over, wraps his arms around himself. Tries to breathe. It's difficult. He wonders if he should bother.

"God, there you are," someone says, and—not someone. Schlatt. It's impossible to mistake that voice for anyone else. Which is good, because Wilbur is not currently about to look up. He can't even manage to get his lungs to cooperate, much less the rest of him. "I've been looking all over for you. I never took you for a pious man, Wilbur. Wilbur?" The voice changes, becoming more cautious, and then: "Shit, Wilbur."

There is no noise to warn him of his approach. Schlatt moves soundlessly, now. But there is a blur of motion just in front of him, and blue enters his field of vision. A wave of calm washes over him at the sight of the color, but not enough. Not nearly enough. He can't breathe, and he's not certain that he wants to try.

"Alright, come on," Schlatt says. "You know the drill, follow my breathing." And he breathes in and out, very loudly, very purposefully. Out of habit, Wilbur attempts to follow, but he can't manage it, his chest collapsing in on itself, his breath stuttering and gasping. "Okay, that's okay, let's do it again. You know how to do this, Wilbur, you've done it before. God, you shouldn't have to rely on a fucking ghost to tell you how to breathe. That's just pathetic. You can do it, come on."

He almost laughs at that. Would, if he had the breath for it. He doesn't think he's ever found Schlatt's vitriol more comforting. And all the while, Schlatt keeps up the pattern, his chest

rising and falling with air that he doesn't need to take in, and slowly, Wilbur manages to fall in time with him.

(they've done this before, once upon a time, back before everything, before this server, back when they were young and stupid and the best of friends, and Schlatt always relied on him to get him home after having a few too many and he always relied on Schlatt to calm the hornet's nest that his mind became, sometimes, when all the world seemed to shrink around him, boxing him in and silencing his voice. they knew each other so well, then, trusted each other despite the warning signs)

"You good?" Schlatt asks. He's so far from good that the question is ridiculous, but he nods. "Great. You look like shit."

He does manage a laugh, then, short and bitter. "I feel a bit shit," he concedes. "Is it that obvious?"

"I mean, I didn't want to say anything," Schlatt says. "But I feel like it's my solemn duty to inform you that you look fucked up. I can't leave you alone for two minutes, can I?"

"Been a bit longer than that, I think," he says. "Where did you go, after the prison?"

"Well, you remember how Dream was being a fucking creepy asshole, right?" Schlatt says dryly. "Yeah, that had me freaked. It felt like—I don't know, he was looking right at me, and it felt like I'd been dunked in a fucking, a fucking oil slick or something, like I could literally feel his eyes on me and his fucking—his murder vibes or some shit, I don't know." His form flickers around the edges, his face pulling into a grimace. "So yeah, I dipped. Went to go get something to drink, except I remembered that I can't fucking do that, so I fucked around for a little while. Saw the crater, did all the tourist shit. Saw Quackity, actually, did you know he's got, like, fiances now or something? No clue how he managed that. But then I decided to come bug you some more, except you weren't at Tommy's or literally anywhere else, and everyone I ran into looked grim as hell. I half-expected to find out that you'd managed to die again or something, or that you'd blown up someone else's city. But here you are."

He raises an expectant eyebrow at the end of that speech, not out of breath at all, the bastard.

(he always did like the sound of his own voice. it must be difficult for him to be silenced, for him to be able to stand in the middle of a crowd and have no one know that he's there at all)

(at the heart of him, there is a part of Schlatt that just wants to be noticed, just wants to be paid attention to. Wilbur knows because they are the same)

Wilbur mulls that over in his mind, and gets stuck on the last part.

He bursts into laughter. He can't help it. And it's not very nice laughter, either, probably lands somewhere on the wrong side of deranged, but he can't stop.

"What's so funny?" Schlatt demands. "God, you're such an asshole, I'm trying to have a conversation and you're—you're crying again, could you cut that out?"

Schlatt is beginning to sound genuinely alarmed, so Wilbur supposes he should make an effort. He gets a handle on the laughter and reaches up to touch his face, giggles still escaping him every few seconds. His cheeks are wet again, his vision blurring.

“Do you know about the Egg?” he asks.

“The—is that a code for something? What fucking Egg?”

“There’s an Egg underneath BadBoyHalo’s house,” he says. “It’s what’s spreading those red vines across the server. And if you go down there and see it, it talks to you and offers you things and gets in your head to try to override your free will.” He smiles. “I don’t recommend it.”

Schlatt is silent for a long moment, just staring, eyebrows so high that they look like they’re trying to escape his forehead.

“You’re not high, are you?” he eventually asks.

“It offered me destruction, Schlatt,” he says. “Fire and blood. And then it tried to get me to kill Tommy, and I almost did, but I didn’t, and then we tried to leave, and it offered me rest.” He smiles wider. “Rest, Schlatt. I wanted it so bad. I don’t remember how we got out of there. I didn’t want to leave.” He smiles wider still, and then something breaks, and he buries his face in his hands. “I wanted it so fucking bad, I wanted to rest, I still want it, but it was in my fucking head and fucking with my brain and I can’t—” He makes a low noise, pressing his hands harder against his skin, as if that will do anything at all.

“Jesus,” Schlatt mutters. “That’s—that’s fucked up. I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

“I don’t want you to say anything,” he mutters. “I don’t want me to say anything. I don’t want to be here. I fucking—I hurt Tommy, after I said that I wouldn’t. I hurt him. I *hurt* him.” He lowers his hands a bit, peering up at Schlatt, who looks very discomfited.

“Don’t start crying again,” Schlatt says, “please, I’m not equipped for that. This is—” He cuts off, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Jesus, Wilbur. The kid’s still alive, right?”

“Of course he is,” he snaps.

“Then talk it out or some shit, I don’t know. That kid thinks the world of you, man. No idea why, but there’s no accounting for taste. Just talk about it.” He shudders. “I don’t know why you’re asking me. You think I know shit about healthy relationships?”

“I woke up alone,” he says. “There was nobody here. I don’t know where anybody is, or if anyone’s hurt, or—I don’t remember how we got out, so what if something happened? What if it got me to do something and I don’t remember it?”

Schlatt is looking more and more out of his depth. Under any other circumstances, it would be funny to see him squirm, but there is no enjoyment in this. Wilbur wants

(Phil)

someone, anyone to tell him what to do here, to tell him how to make this right, but there's no one but Schlatt, and it wouldn't be fair to expect something like this of him, even if he thought he could.

"I'm sure they're all fine," Schlatt says. "Probably stepped out to take a piss somewhere."

He draws in a shuddering breath. Maybe. Maybe. That doesn't feel right, but maybe. He's still shaking, and though he wills himself to stop, it makes no difference. He feels weak, feels pathetic, feels like the worst kind of traitor, to himself and to everyone around him, and the worst part of all of this is that he doesn't know how much was the Egg and how much was him. Because to be sure, he could feel it influencing him. It's easy to pick out in retrospect, the way it wormed its way through his thoughts, twisting him all around, and thinking about it now makes him nauseous again.

But in the end, it only brought out what was already lurking under the surface. What he'd been well and determined to push down, to ignore.

(and in some cases, not even that. a mask only goes so far, only serves so many people, and it takes a long time before the wearer can forget what lies beneath)

It is instinct, really, that has him reaching out, seeking physical contact. He's always liked using touch to ground himself, to reassure himself

(Phil's wings wrap around him and they feel warm feel like safety feel like home feel like he is protected and he is not alone if only for a moment if only for a moment he wishes that it could have been different could have been not like this but his course is set his ending penned and all that's left to do is sign)

that he is real, that he is alive. His hand goes straight through, of course, and electric frisson runs up his arm. Schlatt makes an irritated sound, but puts up with the attempt, and Wilbur blindly tries again, even though he knows it will be futile. He wants something to hold, and in the absence of anyone else, Schlatt will do, but Schlatt will not actually do because he is dead and a ghost and Wilbur is alive and not a ghost, so he is left clutching at what might as well be empty air and wishing desperately for a connection.

He just wants—

(they are the same, they two, linked in life and linked in death and now in)

Something shifts. Undefinable, but undeniable. There is a sudden stinging in his chest.

His fingers curl around Schlatt's arm.

They both freeze.

"What the fuck," Schlatt whispers.

Experimentally, he tightens his grip. The fabric under his fingertips is solid, a bit scratchy. There is a strange lack of body heat, but Schlatt is as tangible as he is.

What.

Schlatt's hand shoots out suddenly, landing on his shoulder. The weight is present and real, and he meets Schlatt's eyes.

"What the fuck?" Schlatt repeats, louder this time. "What the—how are you doing that?"

He doesn't know. *He doesn't know*, except that his chest hurts, right where his scar is, and if he focuses, he can sense what almost feels like—a tether, perhaps, though he's not sure that's the right word. Some kind of connection, some kind of tie between them, and it's as if energy is flowing down it, from him to Schlatt, and actually, wow his chest *hurts*.

It's not *as* if energy is flowing down it. Energy *is* flowing down it. He's getting tired. Too quickly for it to be natural.

(he didn't think to check, didn't think to wonder, but if Schlatt was brought back by the same power that ripped him back to life, why is Schlatt still dead, dead and a ghost, when he is alive and not?)

"I don't know," he stutters, "I don't know how I—"

It's new, and a bit frightening, and somehow, the fear gets in the way. The tether snaps, vanishing just as soon as it was formed. He lurches forward, surprised by the sudden loss of contact, and Schlatt's hand swipes through his chest. Schlatt curses, eyes wide and wild and—not quite scared. Not quite scared, but perhaps something approaching it.

"Do that again," he demands. "Fuck, do that again, you—"

"I don't know how I did it in the first place," he protests. "I can't just—"

And then stops. Outside, there are voices. Distant, but getting closer.

Schlatt takes a long look at him, and he doesn't know what kind of expression he's making, but Schlatt spits out a string of curses and stands, stomping off further into the church. It would have more of an impact, he thinks, if his feet actually made a noise when they hit the ground. He thinks that perhaps they would have, half a minute ago, and he thinks Schlatt thinks so, too, judging by the glare he shoots back at him.

He stands, feeling far more exhausted than he did only moments ago. And that is saying something.

"—not a choice, you *get* that, right?" Tommy is saying. He and Tubbo enter the church side by side. They both look—terrible is a word for it, certainly. The bags under their eyes are dark and thick, their hair sticking out every which way.

(this is your fault definitely your fault you failed them and you know it)

"We can't just—" Tommy continues, and stops abruptly as he sees Wilbur standing there.

For a long moment, there is silence. No one speaks. No one moves. Wilbur traces over Tommy's face, and he can't even begin to interpret the emotions there, and that hurts, hurts worse than the fading ache in his chest, because he should be able to read his brother. Should be able to know him. Right now, he feels a bit like he's looking into the face of a stranger, a stranger of his own making, and he doesn't know how to fix this, doesn't know if he can.

(the words still ring out in his head: *I lied I lied I lied*)

"You're up," Tubbo says, his voice carefully regulated. Tommy says nothing.

"Yeah," he says. "I—you two, I am so—"

"Don't apologize," Tommy snaps. "Don't—I've told you, I have had it up to here with you and your shitty apologies. Don't do that. I don't want to hear it."

Wilbur opens his mouth, and then closes it again.

Because that is the thing: he has nothing else to offer. Apologies are all he can give, because at least he means them. Promises, he can make, but he breaks them just as easily. If there is some action he can perform, he doesn't know it. And it's too little, too late, too late to mend the damage he has caused, and it weighs so little against the side of the scale that holds all of his sins, but it is all he has. All he has, and if Tommy won't accept it, he doesn't know what else to do.

"Okay," he whispers, and silence falls again. The water gurgles softly at his back.

"Okay then," Tubbo finally says, "okay," and it's in a tone of voice that is tired and exasperated and worried all at once, a tone of voice that implies *fine, I'll do it myself if you two are going to be stupid*, and it's a tone that Wilbur has heard before but never like this, to this degree, and it sounds a bit like Phil, really, when he thinks about it. "Okay, so are we going to talk about what that was, then? I feel like we should. But I guess we don't have to if you're not up to it, Wilbur."

"Fuck that," Tommy says. "No, fuck that, he's talking. You're talking, you shit." He stabs a finger toward Wilbur.

"Yeah," he says quietly, "yeah, I owe it to you. I'll—" And then he has to stop talking, because he suddenly gets very dizzy, the room tilting on its axis. He blinks, and then he is sitting on the floor, Tommy on one side of him and Tubbo on the other, Tommy all but yelling in his ear.

"—the fuck are you standing up for, you shithead? Prime, you're so stupid, do you know that? Do you know that you're stupid?"

He keeps going, and Wilbur opens his mouth to apologize, only to shut it again, because Tommy doesn't want apologies, does he? So he says nothing at all, and Tommy falls quiet, and the damn *silence* is overwhelming, overpowering, an unbridgeable gap between them.

And then—

“Wilbur,” Tommy says. Just that. Just Wilbur. Somehow, it manages to carry a wealth of connotations, manages to say *why did you do that* and *why have you been lying to me* and a dozen other things all at once.

And Wilbur doesn’t have a good answer.

“What happened in there, Wilbur?” Tubbo asks, and he supposes he should be glad that they’re willing to sit by him, that they’re not flinching away despite everything, that they’re sticking close. He wouldn’t blame them if they wanted to run and never look back. Some of that wariness has returned to Tubbo’s eyes, and he thinks he can see some of it reflected in Tommy’s, but they’re both still here, so perhaps that counts for something.

Little though he deserves it.

“Tommy, you didn’t hear it, right?” he checks, voice almost a whisper, and Tommy mutely shakes his head. “But you did, Tubbo. What did it say to you?” The words come out slow, reluctant, clumsy.

“A lot of things,” Tubbo says. “Some stuff about power. Mostly the power to protect myself. But I’ve got that already, so I didn’t feel too keen on listening to a breakfast food. And then it started insulting me. It was really mean, actually. Didn’t make me feel great. I could feel it, kind of, in my head. I think that’s how it hurt my feelings so much.”

He closes his eyes. Nods.

“It was in my head, too,” he says. “It—I’m not any better than I was, really. I’ve been lying to you. I want to be. Prime knows I want to be. I’ve—I’ve been *trying*.” Embarrassingly, his voice cracks. “I swear, I have. I don’t want to be the person I turned into. But that person’s still there, is the thing. I could be him so easily, if I let myself. And even maybe if I don’t. Once I start sliding, I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop.” He passes one hand over his face, and then keeps it over his eyes, shielding himself from their judgment. He doesn’t want to see their reactions to this. “The Egg—it shoved its way in and brought all of that out. I couldn’t stop it. I didn’t want to stop it.”

(he was a child born of music and summer breezes, once, laughter and quicksilver charm. that went into the fire, burnt to ash, and the thing that came out was a child of the flames, flickering, dancing, and a bloodsoaked smile, and he got so tired of being that so very quickly and the sword was a relief in every sense of the word because finally the fire was put out, doused by cold, gleaming diamond, gentle blue, and his father’s tears landed on his face and he could feel them, finally, after so long burning)

(but he is born again and the fire leaps high and he can only keep it banked for so long)

“You did stop it, though,” Tubbo says. “You snapped out of it. It wanted you to hurt Tommy and you didn’t.”

“Barely,” he murmurs. “I—I swore to myself that I wouldn’t hurt you again. I swore, but I failed, and I—” No apologies. Tommy doesn’t want apologies. “Fuck.”

He keeps his hand pressed over his eyes. The darkness is calming, just a bit.

(it's a place to hide, the coward that he is, and he is the pied piper leading the children and running away before he can face consequences because that's all he knows how to do)

And then, Tommy yanks his arm down. He flinches at the sharp motion, at the sudden pressure on his skin, even as he leans in to the contact.

"Wilbur," Tommy says, low and serious and more than a little angry. It's not his usual fury, not his loud explosiveness. This is a simmering, slow, pointed anger, almost frightening in its intensity. "You listen to me, and you listen to me right now. You didn't—you need to stop going on about failing, alright? Because you didn't. The Egg wanted you to hurt me, and yeah it was terrifying and definitely not okay, but you didn't. You did stop yourself. You gave the Egg what for. And I—" He breaks off, scowling. "I'm not gonna be able to say this right. But I know, okay? I've always known. I know that *that* you is there, I'm not stupid. I saw it in the prison. And sure, it's actively scary, but I can see it, yeah? The way you've been trying? I know that you don't want—and I don't want—it's not even *that* you, not really, because *that* you didn't care, okay? I saw it, I lived it, I know what you're like, and the you back then got too tired to try, not like you're trying now. Do you—do you understand what I'm saying, Wilbur?"

(the you back then was exhausted and sick and spiraling and broken from the stress of presidency and then exile and all you ever really wanted was to make something good and to have it ripped from you was more than you could bear and you were just so tired by the end and you are tired, so very tired now)

He stares. "I—think? But—"

"No, no, no buts, I'm not fucking done. So maybe the Egg got in your head and fucked you up a bit. It sucked and it was scary, but you stopped yourself, and if it happens again, you've got us, okay? It'll be fine as long as you let us help you." Tommy sucks in a deep breath. "That's not what I'm upset about. I mean, I am fucking upset about it, but that's not what I'm most upset about."

"Then what are you most upset about?" he asks, thoroughly bewildered by now. He understands what Tommy is trying to say, but not his logic, not his apparent willingness to continue to trust him. He should know better than that,

(because how many times did he hurt him in that dark ravine, how many times did he manipulate him, how many times did he *snap*)

should know better than to place faith in him now that he knows him for what he is, what he continues to be. And he doesn't understand why this is, apparently, not the thing that he's most worked up over.

Tommy doesn't answer right away.

"The fact that you have to ask," he says, "the fact that you have to ask, now that is fucking terrible."

Wilbur glances at Tubbo, hoping for clarification. But Tubbo just stares back, the corners of his eyes pinched. He wishes he had an excuse to turn around; he wants to see if Schlatt is still here.

“Wilbur,” Tommy says, and Wilbur looks back at him, because it is Tommy’s voice that cracks now and Wilbur feels a thread of alarm run through him, “you said—you said it would give you rest.”

The words hang in the air, unchallenged, unanswered.

“You kept fighting us,” Tubbo says quietly. “All the way until we got you up here to the holy water. We were lucky that Puffy got there to help. I’m not sure we would’ve been able to do it without her. And you were—you got really sick, but you were still fighting us, and then you went to sleep for a day and a half.”

He jerks at that, and glances outside. “A day and a half?” he repeats, somewhat numbly.

“The whole thing happened yesterday,” Tubbo says. “You slept all the rest of that day, and all of today, too. We were scared you weren’t going to wake up.”

“Speak for yourself,” Tommy mutters. “But you would’ve liked that, wouldn’t you? If you hadn’t woken up.”

He meets Tommy’s glare. It’s an accusation, nothing more and nothing less. Tommy is angry. He deserves to be.

There is a lie on his tongue. But it would be fruitless now.

“Maybe,” he says, and feels both their gazes on his face, and amends that to, “Yes.”

He doesn’t know what else to say. There should be no more lies. But he doesn’t know how to explain himself, doesn’t know how to explain the weariness that weighs down his bones and the way he struggles to function and the way he can’t stop remembering what it was like in those final days, what it was like to know that his story was coming to a close and he was the villain and he was fine with it, because even if the ending would not be a good one, at least it would be an ending. He doesn’t know how to explain that he never intended to survive the rebellion, that one way or another, he sought his own destruction, and that death was rest and peace but no true healing. He doesn’t know how to explain that he’s regained perspective and the capacity to regret and the desire to never, ever hurt them like he once did, but not any will to live for himself. Not any desire to stay in this world that has taken and taken and taken and put his pieces back together all wrong.

He doesn’t know how to explain any of it. And even if he did, he wouldn’t. They don’t deserve to have to deal with that.

(they are children, still, despite your best efforts, too old for their age, but they should not have to carry the burdens of their elders on their backs any longer)

“Oh,” Tubbo says, small and quiet.

“Why,” Tommy says.

He closes his eyes.

“Do I really have to explain it?” he asks.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Tommy says, “I want to know why you didn’t tell us.”

He opens his eyes. Tommy is glaring at him, but it’s not quite anger anymore; it’s desperation, and fear, and worst of all, a terrible, horrible understanding,

(there is a boy with blue eyes gone grey and the boy stares into lava and Ghostbur isn’t sure that any amount of blue will make this better but it’s all he has, is all he can offer, and he allows the worst implications to flutter out of his brain like butterflies in favor of good cheer because it’s the only thing he can do to help and no one wants him to be the way that he was, so this has to be better, better to be a fool than a monster so a fool is what he shall be)

and he wishes it weren’t there. Wishes he didn’t know exactly why it *is*.

(he should have killed the green bastard then and there and hang what Tommy wanted, they all would have slept the better for it)

“It’s not your cross to bear,” he says. “It’s mine. It’s my own fault, and you shouldn’t have to deal with it.”

“So you thought lying to our faces was better?” Tommy demands. “You thought you could slap a smile on and it’d all turn out okay? That’s not how it works, Wilbur. *I* know that.”

Tubbo makes a noise, wounded.

“But really, you didn’t think it was something we’d want to know? That you still have a fucking death wish? What were we supposed to do, play around at being a happy family until you just up and died again one day? Because the last time you didn’t tell us something like this went so very well?” There is a flush spreading across Tommy’s cheeks. “I’m sick of people lying to me, Wilbur. I’m sick of you lying to me. How the fuck are we supposed to help you if you don’t tell us that you need help?”

He finds himself at a loss for words.

(he hasn’t been thinking about it in those terms. hasn’t been thinking about himself as someone who needs help, someone who deserves help. he is fire and he is ash and he is a spectre given physical form and he still doesn’t know what his purpose is, doesn’t know who brought him here and for what, so he has set himself to righting the wrongs he committed against his brother, but he hardly needs to take care of himself to do that, does he?)

(does he need help?)

(you made an ending but the story went on and you are back in it now, and who is to say there is no different path, no good road to set your dust-weary foot upon, and the sun shines regardless of what you do and indeed who is to say there will not be such endings?)

“I don’t want you to die, Wilbur,” Tommy says. “I can’t fucking do that again. You can’t leave, alright?”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to be here right now,” Tubbo puts in, still subdued. “We can help you learn how again. You’ve just got to give us the chance.”

It’s that that does it. Said so innocently, so determinedly, as if it’s that simple, as if there isn’t a thing with teeth and claws lurking below his skin, ready to lash out at anyone and anything, himself included. And he doesn’t understand it, not really, doesn’t understand why these two are so willing to help him after everything he’s put them through, doesn’t understand how they could think him worthy of it.

“Oh,” he chokes out, and distantly thinks that he is really crying too much today.

“Aw, jeez,” Tommy says. “Oh no, don’t—don’t cry, big man, come on. We don’t need to do that.”

Maybe. But on the other hand, maybe he does, and Tommy is very close, he suddenly realizes, and Tubbo, too, both of them close enough to pull into a hug, as long as they don’t object, so that’s what he does.

And they don’t object.

He should not, perhaps, be clinging to them as hard as he is. But they don’t tell him to stop, so he doesn’t.

For a while, they sit there, and he hugs them and they bury themselves into his side, and it’s almost like being back at home again, like Techno will come marching out of the woods with his sword mounted over his shoulder and Phil will call them in for dinner any moment, and in a few minutes he’ll get a message from Schlatt on his comm inviting him in on his latest business venture that is actually a thin veneer for a scam, like always.

He glances up, and Schlatt is nearer, in his field of vision, considering them with a raised eyebrow but a thankful lack of mockery. He rolls his eyes when he sees him looking, but from Schlatt, that’s practically a ringing endorsement.

He should probably say something about Schlatt’s presence at some point. No more lies.

In a minute, perhaps. For now, he holds his brothers tight and tries to let himself believe that everything is going to be alright.

(easier said than done)

This is definitely the beginning of Wilbur's recovery arc, not the end. This conversation was a good start, but everything's far from fixed, and there's plenty of obstacles that are about to get in the way of the current (relative) peace. But! This fic does have a happy ending, that much I can guarantee. We've just got to get there first.

Also I snuck my favorite Stephen King quote into this chapter, so kudos to you if you spotted it

The response to last chapter was literally so amazing you guys, thank you all so much!! I love hearing from you, so if you're enjoying, feel free to drop some kudos and/or leave a comment! Nothing makes my day more! Also, my [tumblr is here](#) if you ever want to stop by!

Next up, Chapter Nine: In which Wilbur has a few more conversations. Also, he hasn't been looking at his comm, has he? Wonder if that's gonna be relevant.

but it gets hard to stand (ii)

Chapter Notes

This chapter honestly just consists of several conversations smushed together with sticky tack, but I hope y'all like it anyway. Also! Puffy is here now! Can I get some pogs in the chat!

Content warnings for swearing, mentioned alcohol abuse, past mind control, allusions to suicidal ideation, and blood mentions.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They get off the floor eventually. They have to, even if Wilbur doesn't really want to let them go. He feels a bit better after having several good cries, but he's also so very wrung out, and if they could all just stay where they are for several months, that would be ideal. But if wishes were horses and all that, and according to Tommy, both Sam and someone named Puffy—"She's a good one Wil, you'll like her"—are waiting for them back at Tommy's house.

"We didn't want to move you there because we hoped the holy water would make you better," Tubbo informs him. "But there are vines near here and there aren't at Tommy's, so that's mostly where we've been."

It makes sense, of course, and

(there is a great amount of relief in knowing he wasn't abandoned, that there was a practical reason as to why he woke to a dark hall and an empty church and a still bell and no one in sight)

there's no reason to stay here any longer than they need to. The comforts of a more familiar place sound appealing right about now, even if that means interacting with people he barely knows when he only just feels stable enough to keep on his feet, much less maintain any kind of emotional equilibrium.

He'll manage.

(he's so tired of managing)

So, off they go, and he's quick to realize that there is no path in the entire SMP that is free of the vines.

He is acutely aware of them in a way that he wasn't, before. Where once they were vaguely unsettling, now they are an imminent threat. Whenever he looks at one for too long, static begins to creep in again, and he can't tell if it's real or if it's his imagination, his brain

reacting violently to the association. But it's difficult not to look at them. They're everywhere.

The boys are uncomfortable, too. He can tell by the way their chatter is awkward and stilted, Tommy too loud and Tubbo too quiet. They're trying to distract him, or perhaps they're trying to distract themselves. Or both. What should be a short walk seems to be taking forever, and his footsteps on the wood of the path reverberate strangely in his head, somehow both muffled and echoing, far too prominent for a noise that should be inconsequential, and he's focusing too hard on it but better that than the vines. Better that than the rest of the mess.

"So," Schlatt says, "are we gonna talk about whatever the hell that was, or what?"

He casts him a sideways glance. Schlatt has given up any pretense of walking, is drifting along beside the three of them with his legs kicked up and his arms folded behind his head. He seems to have recovered nicely from the earlier shock, and Wilbur can't say that he's particularly glad about it. Not when Tommy and Tubbo are right there, already so concerned for him. He doesn't want them to see him talking to thin air. That's Techno's thing, not his, and at least Techno has a reason for it.

But then—he's resolved to tell them, hasn't he? Would waiting make the conversation any better?

"Because I have to say, I didn't see that coming," Schlatt continues. "What even was that? And *can* you do that again? Being incorporeal ain't all it's cracked up to be, you know. I think maybe if you did it again, I could get a drink or something. God, I want a drink. I deserve a drink, after all of this bullshit."

(here is a resolution he's already made: no matter what this turns out to be, no matter what they discover about this connection between them, Wilbur refuses to enable him. they have been down this path already. and perhaps he has not yet made up his mind about his own path, has not yet made the decision between which roads to traverse a second time and which roads to lay down fresh, but he has seen the wreck that his one-time friend became and never again, not if he can help it, not if he has any say. which it seems, he does)

(time to derail)

"Actually, you two," he says, perhaps a bit louder than he needs to, and Tommy and Tubbo cut off what they were saying—something about Snowchester, he thinks, "there's something else I should probably tell you."

"Those words are very ominous," Tommy says. "I feel like you shouldn't say those words in that order. Makes me shiver."

"Nothing all that bad," he says. "Just a bit annoying, really. I didn't say anything about it before because I wasn't sure if bringing it up was a good idea or not, but it's only fair that you should know at this point. Schlatt's been around."

A beat, and then:

“Fucking *Schlatt*—?”

“What?”

Tommy and Tubbo’s voices overlap, and Wilbur glances at the ghost. Schlatt is staring at him, face slack. He’s caught him off guard, then. Good. Serves him right.

“He’s a ghost,” he says. “Not sure why I’m all solid and he’s not. He also can’t get anyone else to see him, so there’s that.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Tommy says, “so Schlatt’s back, too? But he’s a ghost? Like Ghostbur?”

“Not quite like Ghostbur, I don’t think. He seems completely himself. Just a bit more transparent about the edges.” He considers for a moment, and shoots another glance at Schlatt. “But he is a ghost, so we could call him Ghostschlatt, I suppose. Or wait, that’s too long.”

“Glatt,” Tubbo mutters.

He snaps his fingers. “Glatt! Perfect.”

“Wait, no! Wilbur, shut up, you asshole! You can’t call me Glatt, that’s so fucking stupid, just say my goddamn name. It’s not that hard!” Schlatt comes out of whatever shocked stupor he was in, his eyebrows drawing in for an impressive glare. Wilbur studiously ignores him, expending a great deal of effort on suppressing his smile.

“Oh, are you sure it couldn’t be—” Tommy’s lips press together, an obvious attempt not to burst into laughter, and when he speaks again, his voice vibrates with mirth. “How about Schloast?”

“That’s worse! How is that worse! God, I hate all of you. I’m going back to the afterlife, just you try and stop me.”

Schlatt very conspicuously does not go back to the afterlife, which Wilbur takes as tacit permission to continue. Not that he needs the permission. He never needs permission to make fun of Schlatt, and this is going far better than he anticipated. Besides the initial reactions, no one seems particularly angry, not at him for keeping the information secret, nor even at Schlatt for literally anything and everything. So that’s good. This is good. They needed an excuse for a bit of laughter, he thinks. Genuine laughter.

Somewhere in the distance, a bird calls, a harsh, loud *caw*.

“Schloast,” he repeats. “Nice. Very nice. I think that will stick.”

“Wait,” Tubbo says. “Wait. So. Schlatt’s here. Is he—I mean, is he any better? Than he was?” His voice is very serious, but there is an odd note to it, an upward tilt that almost sounds like—hope?

Schlatt cuts off mid tirade.

Shit. He didn't tell them that Schlatt was here right now, did he? Just that he's been around. So they have no reason to assume—

Shit.

“Why do you care about that?” Tommy asks. “He was a bastard. He literally ordered your death.”

Tubbo sighs, eyes cast downward. “I know,” he says. “I still have nightmares about it. But you know, there were times when it really wasn't so bad.” He glances at Wilbur, then, and there is some of the old fear in his eyes, fear of judgment, perhaps, fear of repercussions, fear of being berated for so much as daring to suggest that there was a single positive aspect of Schlatt's reign. And there was a time when he would have been right to be afraid,

(a time of dark halls and thoughts that slip away from him and the conviction that everyone stands against him and there is no one he could trust and Tubbo stayed, Tubbo stayed behind in the city that was no longer his, that was ripped from his grasp, and Tubbo serves the tyrant, serves the enemy, and he says that he is a spy for them that he is on their side but Wilbur cannot trust the people on his side much less the people who he cannot watch who he cannot keep tabs on and Schlatt is bringing Techno up to the podium and Wilbur turns aside and does nothing at all and he would have blown up the platform with Tubbo on it if it had worked so where is the room for regret)

but Wilbur nods at him, trying for encouraging and perhaps not quite succeeding, but it must be good enough, because Tubbo continues, “It was, a lot, I mean. But there were good times, too, especially near the beginning. He had visions and a plan, and a lot of it sucked but some of it was good. And he hadn't started drinking yet. Not a lot. Things went downhill when he started drinking. But he wasn't so bad to me, before that. So I thought that maybe if he was better now, that could be good.”

Wilbur listens, and his heart aches. Tubbo is barely older than Tommy. He shouldn't have been put through that, any of that, and to hear it laid out

(to hear what you did you made him a soldier just as surely as Tommy but at least you did not abandon Tommy to a den of wolves did not catch him between two worlds put the weight of everything on his shoulders and leave him behind to pick up the pieces did not make him a spy and then refuse to believe him and hang him out to dry as he died begging and terrified)

hurts, and it isn't right and it isn't fair, and worst of all, nothing can be done to take it back.

(why is it always the children who suffer for the adults' mistakes?)

Schlatt stares blankly. And then vanishes. But he's still there, Wilbur can tell; just out of the corner of his eye, there is a ripple of blue that doesn't belong, a shimmer in the air, the faintest suggestion of a presence.

He opens his mouth. Hesitates. Remembers, *people like us don't change*, the voice doubled and tripled and so very sure of itself, and Prime but he hopes that isn't true, he *hopes*, but he doesn't know. He doesn't know.

“I’m not sure I’m the best judge of whether or not someone is better,” he says quietly, and hates himself for the way Tubbo’s shoulders slump. But saying anything else would have been a lie, he thinks, and he’s resolved to tell no more lies.

And there’s no more time to come up with something comforting, because they’ve made it to Tommy’s house, and two people have made themselves comfortable on the front lawn. Sam, he recognizes, though he’s no longer in the warden gear, and seems to hold himself just a bit less tightly. The woman—maybe. She’s vaguely familiar, in a way that tells him that Ghostbur probably saw her around, at least, but may never have really interacted. They are both watching their arrival, and Sam makes eye contact, offering him a nod.

The woman stands, long, curly white-blonde hair flaring out behind her, and she approaches. So Wilbur stops walking, makes her come to him. She doesn’t seem to mind, if she notices what he’s doing in the first place, just extends a hand. There is no hesitation whatsoever, no trepidation about greeting someone who much of the server believes to be a monster.

“Captain Puffy,” she says. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

A wry, twisted smile wants to make its way to his face. He lets it.

“None of it good, I’m sure,” he says, and shakes her hand. She has a strong grip, and calloused fingers.

“You might be surprised,” she says. “Nice to meet you.”

“Puffy—um, Puffy got us out of there,” Tubbo ventures. “It was pretty awesome, actually.”

Oh. That’s right. He’s heard the name recently. Tubbo told him: Puffy came to help, Puffy saved them, Puffy dragged them out. So Puffy saw him, then, saw him in that moment, when the red haze had its strongest grip on his mind and he wasn’t thinking of anything but giving in to it. She saw him. She knows what he was offered, knows what he wants, above all else.

Great.

“I ran into Ranboo on his way back home,” Puffy offers. “He told me that you guys were going to see the Egg, and I got worried.” Her gaze is uncomfortably steady, uncomfortably knowing. Wilbur wants to look away, but that would feel too much like showing weakness in front of this stranger. He’s done enough of that for one day. “I know what that thing can do. Bad and Ant were my friends, and now I don’t even recognize them.” She pauses for a moment, and his discomfort increases. He gets the unsettling impression that whatever front he’s putting up, she can see right through. “So I’m glad to see that you’re doing alright.”

She states it plainly. Genuinely. Like she means it. She’s barely even met him, and she means it.

“Thank you,” he says, and hopes that they’ll let him get away with the hoarseness of his voice. “And thank you for what you did in there. I can’t say that I remember it, but I’m grateful for it. Now, at least.”

The words burn. Acting like he is unaffected now burns. Thanking her casually, when he would like nothing more than to hide in Tommy's house and sleep for a year and pretend that none of this is happening, pretend that no one has seen him at his lowest and at his worst, it burns. It all burns, somewhere in his chest, somewhere in his throat, and it's not that dancing, dangerous fire but rather a different heat, smoldering coals.

"Of course," she says. "Tommy and Tubbo are good kids. I'm not going to let anything happen to them if I can help it."

It sounds to him both reassurance and challenge, though he doesn't know if he's interpreting it right or if his mind is jumping at nothing again.

(though if it is a challenge, he cannot possibly say that it is undeserved, cannot possibly claim that he is the responsible, trustworthy, caring guardian that they ought to have)

"Aw, Puffy, you're making my heart all warm and tingly," Tommy says, grinning.

"Ookay," Puffy says, rolling her eyes, and it's all very good-natured, and can it really be possible that Tommy has found two adults that are at least somewhat responsible in Sam and Puffy? It seems like it, and gratitude and jealousy war within him as Tommy leads him to settle down on the grass, all five of them sitting in a loose circle. It is good that someone is looking out for the kids, very good, and he should not be irritated that it isn't him. He shouldn't. It's irrational and unfair and he has no right to be so possessive,

(and hasn't that gotten you in trouble before? shall you sing of your L'Manberg once again, your beautiful city, yours and no one else's, yours to destroy if it could not match your vision? shall the symphony become a requiem, for old time's sake?)

so he tamps down on it, bottles it up and glances around for a distraction. The shimmer of blue is gone, Schlatt actually disappeared, it seems, so his eyes lock onto a flurry of motion overhead, a dark bird backlit by the shimmer of stars, slowly wheeling, circling. As he watches, it is joined by another.

"Really, Wilbur, I have to ask, are you actually okay?" Sam's voice brings him back to earth. "I've had experience with the Egg myself. I know how—unpleasant it can be, when it gets in your head. But the holy water helped?"

He

(tries not to scream)

inclines his head.

"I don't feel particularly eggy, if that's what you're asking," he says. "I can't say that I haven't been better. But I suppose holy water does wonders."

"That's good," Sam says, and he actually looks relieved. Relieved for him, and it's strange, because once again, they *barely know each other*, and unlike Puffy, Sam was on the server during the war. During all of the wars. He should know who he's talking to, and he doesn't

have the excuse that Tommy and Tubbo have, the excuse of a deep prior attachment to overlook all of his sins.

“We’ve been talking, big man,” Tommy says, “and we’re going to try to get rid of it.”

Denial rises up instantly, a healthy dose of fear along with it, a strong desire to argue against them, but he stops before he can act on it, before he can voice anything aloud, because he doesn’t quite understand where this emotion is coming from. Obviously, the Egg should be destroyed. He’d rather like to take an axe to it himself.

He doesn’t want to see Tommy anywhere near it, though. Him or Tubbo. That must be it.

(though it got its hook in deep put its foot through the door and blew off the hinges and can you really be certain that none of it stayed inside that none of it is in you still that you would not rise to its defense again)

“I didn’t give a shit about it before,” Tommy rushes to continue, eyeing him, “but you know, it was a bitch to Tubbo and it made you—I mean, it hurt you bad, Wilbur, so I don’t think it’s something we want to keep around, yeah?”

“No, no, you’re completely right, of course,” he says. “I think it’s a good idea. But Tommy, you do know that this isn’t your responsibility, right? You don’t have to do anything.” It’s a useless echo, words he’s said before now repeated, for no other reason than he has to try. He already knows what Tommy will say, and sure enough, Tommy smirks at him like he’s said something truly ridiculous.

“I know that, big man,” he says. “Believe me, I’m tired of having to run around and do shit like this. But it seems to me that as long as that thing’s around, we’re not going to be able to get any damn peace on this server. I know I sure won’t, knowing that it’s down there being all—all egg-like. So we fight this one last fight, and maybe this place will actually be livable again. Get all this viney shit off my lawn, you know? Back to normal?”

(it won’t be that simple. it’s never that simple. there is always something else that comes, always another storm on the horizon, and he has held his sword too long to believe he will ever be able to put it down again, will be able to replace it with the pen that he once believed was so mighty. there is always another fight. there is always another fall. there is always another cliff)

“Sam and I have been wanting to kick its ass for a while,” Puffy adds. “It just never seemed like a good time, and there’s only two of us, you know? And Sam’s got his prison responsibilities. But it’s gone too far this time. It needs to go.”

“We can’t know for sure if anyone else on the server has been taken in by it besides Bad and Ant,” Sam puts in softly. “Punz has, I think, but we don’t know who else. But there’s a few people we can try talking to. We want to make this a concentrated effort.”

“Probably smart,” he says, even as something in him recoils from the idea of going to others for help, going to others when they can’t know who is infected and who is not, when they

can't know if there's anyone else they can trust. Better to stand on their own than to be betrayed.

He casts his eyes to the sky idly. He counts five birds—no, wait, six. Six birds. It's difficult to tell the color against the night sky, but he thinks they might be black.

(black-feathered harbingers, heralds, hierophants)

"Sorry that you got dragged into this," Puffy says, and he looks back down. "All of you, really, but it must suck to be back for a few days and then have to deal with a mind control Egg and its cult." She grimaces. "We really should've nipped it in the bud sooner, but like I said. There's been lots of other—problems." She lingers on the last word, looking like she wants to say something else. Wilbur almost asks, but she's refrained from prying too deeply into him, even given what she saw, so he'll pay her the same courtesy.

"Trouble seems to follow me," he says evenly, "and that's just when I'm not instigating it."

"That's a rude thing to call Tommy," Tubbo says. Puffy makes a *pfff* sort of sound, and he can't hold back his own chuckle as the realization dawns on Tommy's face, followed by mock outrage.

"Oh, fuck you," he growls, reaching out to yank on Tubbo's horns. "I'm not trouble, you bitch, I am a pure and utter delight, and you are all so very lucky that I am allowing you to be in my glorious presence, on my own property."

"Your property is a dirt hut," Sam points out, and Tommy scowls.

"Well, alright Mr. Redstone Genius," he says, "my home here is ten million times better than any of your builds. It's got character, it has. I'm not a sell out. I stick to my guns."

"What does that even mean?"

Wilbur grins, and glances up again, and then the smile fades from his face because there are a lot of birds, now, too many for him to count, filling the air with the sound of their flapping and the occasional croaking call, and he's surprised that none of the others have noticed yet. All of the birds are following individual flight paths, not moving as one, in a flock, and that's odd, or it should be.

Only he's seen this before, if not so many at once.

(the angel never travels far but the omens are drawn to him like the warning that they are and their calls sing death and he knows this song well was raised on it from a child)

"One for sorrow," he whispers, "two for joy."

The others stop bickering, and as one, follow his gaze.

"Oh shit," Tommy says. He understands immediately, as Wilbur knew he would. They were raised under the same roof.

He stands, crossing over to the Prime Path, surveying the area. There's no sign of anyone else, not yet, but birds—crows, they are crows, their eyes glinting and their feathers black as pitch—are perching on top of Tommy's hill, on all of the buildings within sight. There are *so many*, more than he has ever seen, and he doesn't know what that means, but he's sure it can't be good.

(even on a battlefield, blood dripping from a sword held loosely and crows pecking at the remains, even then, there weren't as many as now)

"That's—a lot of birds," Puffy says. "Is this something we should be worried about?" She stands as well, and Sam joins her, hand wrapped around the hilt of his trident. Tommy glances between all of them, eyes tight at the corners, and gets to his feet, pulling Tubbo along with him. Tubbo's brows scrunch in confusion for all of five seconds before Tommy whispers something in his ear, and his eyes widen.

"Normally, I'd say not," Wilbur murmurs. "But this *is* a lot of birds."

He feels so wrong-footed, caught entirely off guard. He wasn't expecting this, had no time to prepare, and it feels a little bit like a conflation of two worlds that were never meant to meet. On one side, the SMP, his troubles here, his history, these people that he is sitting with. On the other side, a distant past returning, and he remembers all too well the only time that happened, remembers his laughter and his shouting, the dismay and the refusal, the turn and the acceptance and the sword.

"Okay, wait," Tubbo says, "I'm pretty sure that rhyme only goes up to twelve, so if one is for sorrow and two is for joy and all that, what's a shit ton for?" He sounds genuinely curious, but that curiosity is masking something darker underneath, something that sounds like dread, and Wilbur knows that he knows what's coming too.

"Philza," he says, and he doesn't need to elaborate, because Phil is there.

It has never been strange to him, in the past, how innocuous a man Philza is. One would never begin to guess his moniker just from looking at him, him and his sandals and green robe and stupid striped bucket hat and his open, pleasant face. One would never begin to guess at the blood staining his fingertips, the blood that saturates his footsteps, the way that his hands are used just as easily for violence as they are to tape a bandage over scrapes or dry a child's tears. Wilbur is a long way from the child that he used to be, from the child that thought this man could do no wrong, but even still, even when he began learning his father for the terrifying creature he could be, he never found the dichotomy strange. Phil has always just been Phil, and *Phil* can encompass a multitude of contrasting capabilities.

He finds it strange now.

Perhaps it is the way that everyone else has gone silent, staring at the man as he makes his way toward them. Maybe it is the way that Tommy has gone very, very tense. Maybe it is the crows, because Phil has had at least a few of them following him around for as long as he can remember, but never a flock like this, never what must be hundreds. Maybe it is the way that Phil still, *still* hides his wings, and Wilbur still shies away from thinking through the reason why. Maybe it's their surroundings, the fact that he looks different, somehow, in the open air

under the night sky, different from how he appeared in his own kitchen only a few days ago. A few days. A week? He's not sure. It feels like centuries and hours all at once.

Maybe it is the look on his face. Deathly serious. No room for softness.

Wilbur knows that Phil is the Angel of Death. He's not sure he has ever been so aware of it as he is now.

(even then, even that day, there was no angel in that room with them, only a father and a son, and it was not the angel that committed the act and perhaps that is why the angel is here now, because the angel can survive what the man cannot, and he's avoided thinking about it but he has to wonder now if he broke his father just as he broke everything else in his selfishness and his spiraling and all his shattered faultlines)

"Why are you here," Tommy says. "Why the actual fuck are you here."

Phil draws up short, close enough to carry on a conversation but not quite close enough to reach out to. He folds his arms and lifts an eyebrow.

"I was—" he starts, and Wilbur decides not to let him finish.

Because *fuck* the Angel of Death. He wants his father.

Because there is distance between them, and wounds they've dealt each other and wounds that have been dealt by others and by this point, their family really is just one big open wound,

(and it does not escape him that Technoblade is not here, is not following on Phil's heels like he so often does, looming protectively, the promise of bloodshed in his eyes)

but Wilbur sees Phil and for a moment, all of that flies out the window, because there is a part of him that is still thirteen years old and so very sure that nothing bad in all the world can touch him, not with this man for a father. So very sure that all Phil has to do is lift a finger, spread his wings, and all of the night terrors will run screaming and he will be safe. There is a part of him that is young and injured and wishes for nothing more than to be protected, and the rest of him recoils at the notion because he feels older than this body of his, most days, and he has not needed protection for a very long time.

But needing is different from wanting

(is different from deserving)

and a bone-deep weariness suffuses him, and so perhaps he can allow himself another moment of weakness, if Phil will grant him this.

He crosses the feet that separate them in three large strides, and throws his arms around him.

Phil makes a noise of surprise, a quiet gasp, and for a moment, Wilbur fears he won't respond, but then he's returning the embrace with equal fervor, and the angel has retreated and here is his father.

“Hey,” he murmurs, “hey, it’s okay, Wil, you’re okay. Everything’s okay, I’ve got you.”

(yes this is good this is alright this is home at last)

He shakes his head roughly, burying his face into Phil’s shoulder for one second, two seconds, three. Above, a dozen or so birds erupt into raucous calling. He lets himself have this respite, and then he says, muffled into the fabric, “So things are a bit fucked, actually.”

“That why you haven’t been answering your comms?” Phil asks softly, and—

His—

“Oh, *shit*,” he says, and jerks back, digging into his pocket and coming up with his comm a moment later. As soon as he pulls it out, it lights up, messages blinking up at him from over the past few days, starting from the afternoon after the prison visit and continuing from there, growing greater in frequency as time passed. A few jump out at him—

Philza whispers to you: ranboo said you were checking out an egg cult???

Philza whispers to you: you good??

and then—

Philza whispers to you: again not to be pushy but the words egg cult put together have me concerned

Philza whispers to you: check in when you feel like it?

and a few more messages along those lines, and then—

Philza whispers to you: wil i understand if you dont want to talk to me but pls let me know youre ok

and a few more like that, and then finally, sent just a couple of hours ago—

Philza whispers to you: im omw

Philza whispers to you: last chance to stop me

He blinks. Scrolls through again, skimming. Notices what he didn’t at first; there’s a few messages from Techno interspersed in there.

Technoblade whispers to you: not that I care what you do but phil’s highkey freaking out

Technoblade whispers to you: let him know you’re alive please I can’t live like this

And then, timestamped just after Phil’s final message—

Technoblade whispers to you: very cringe of you

He looks back up at Phil, and there is that sensation of alienation once again, of not quite knowing the man that stands in front of him. But he can recognize the worry in the furrow of his brow, the twitch in his arm, as if he's barely stopping himself from reaching out again.

For the first time, he imagines what he must look like. It didn't matter before; Tommy and Tubbo were there, and so was Puffy, and he doesn't particularly care what Sam thinks of him at the moment. But Phil is different. He doesn't want Phil to have to see how wrecked he is.

Though he's probably ruined his chances of that.

"In my defense," he says, "I was absolutely not ignoring you on purpose."

"I sort of gathered," Phil says, "but you do understand that that doesn't make me any less concerned."

"Wait, so that's it?" Tommy erupts. "Wilbur doesn't answer you so you come running? Just like that? What the fuck, man?"

Tommy makes a valid point. But Wilbur is standing right there, and the spasm of pain that passes across Phil's face is impossible to ignore. He thinks he might have an idea

(you wrote him letters and one day you did not write him letters anymore so of course he reacted when you opened a line of dialogue and then did not reply again of course he feared the worst this is what you have done to him)

as to what prompted it, and—there is a reason. There is always a reason, why he does what he does. They all have their reasons, and the problems come when their reasons are opposed to one another's, and no one sits down and tries to understand, and instead they all yell and rage and blow up nations and try to find some way to express themselves in a manner that the others will *get*, and it never, ever works.

There needs to be an olive branch. There needs to be a peace offering. He understands Tommy's anger with Phil, and he has his own to grapple with, but there can be no repairs if they don't start somewhere.

And Phil has his own hurts, too. His own scars.

So, before Phil can respond, he steps in. Steps up. Feels some of the old responsibility settle across his shoulders.

"Would you be willing to help us make an omelet, Phil?" he asks.

Phil looks at him for a long time. Searching for—something. Wilbur has no idea if he finds it.

"I'm fond of omelets," he says slowly. "If you wouldn't mind filling me in?"

Tommy makes a noise of protest but does not react otherwise. He seems a bit at a loss for words, which is never good when it comes to Tommy, but it is either this or let the rent between them fester and widen until there is no bridge long enough to cross to the other side. Wilbur doesn't want that.

(he lost his family once, used Tommy and used Techno and used Phil in the worst way that it is possible to use a person, much less a parent, and if he can admit his own mistakes and attempt to repair them then perhaps there is hope yet)

“Sure,” he says, even though he knows he won’t be saying everything, won’t give Phil any of the finer details if he can help it. He’s resolved to no more secrets, but knowing what the Egg is and what it can do is one thing. Knowing what it offered, and that he wanted so badly to accept it, is quite another. Phil can tell that he’s hurting; he doesn’t need the details. “Would Techno be interested?”

“He’ll come if I ask,” Phil replies, and it is both a non-answer and too telling.

(he wants his brother wants his twin wants all four of them united but they remain divided and no one to blame but themselves)

“Of course he will,” Tommy mutters, and Phil winces again.

Wilbur takes a moment to intensely regret everything, and accidentally makes eye contact with one of the crows. It stares back, hops to one side, ruffles its feathers, and settles back down, as if it’s a dare, as if it’s challenging him to do anything about it.

(he’s never seen Phil with so many crows and he has to wonder why, why now, though part if him is afraid he already knows the answer, afraid that it’s a symbol, a sign, an omen, and Phil has always embraced his role as death’s angel but how far does that go and how much can a good man take before he decides that mercy is too difficult a path?)

“Well, the more the merrier, I guess,” Puffy says, breaking into what is a very awkward silence. Wilbur decides that he likes her, just for that alone. “You can come join us, and we’ll tell you what we know.”

Phil smiles a bit, faintly, politely, and inclines his head. And he comes forward, his movements slow and cautious, and Tommy gives him a wide berth, and Phil accommodates them, accommodates all of them, really, because he still seems to take care not to sit too close. Even to him. And part of him wants to scream, wants to rage, wants to dive into his father’s arms again and beg him to hold him until all the terrible things in the world go away, but he doesn’t. He sits, watches his reactions as Puffy launches into an abridged recounting of events, and wonders when the divide between them got so vast.

He already knows the answer to that, of course. But Phil is here now, came when he thought there might be trouble, and he has to believe that means something.

Looking at Tommy, who hasn’t taken his eyes off Phil since he arrived, who hasn’t relaxed his posture at all, who is holding himself so stiffly that his muscles are trembling, he hopes that it’s not too late. And that everyone is still willing to try.

CC!Phil said that chat was crows, and I went *bet*, how much crow symbolism can I pack into this fic. The answer is, for better or for worse, a good bit.

Fun fact, the original draft of this chapter did not have the hug in it, but when I re-read it, I thought to myself, wow, something feels terribly wrong here, and it was because they weren't hugging. Putting in the hug fixed it. I may be an angst gremlin, but I am also a touch-starved hug monster, and I simply do not care if I am predictable, all of these characters get to hug each other all of the time those are the rules.

My tumblr is [here](#)! Also, I'm currently working on a very self-indulgent Wilbur-centric h/c wingfic oneshot, so keep an eye out for that if you think you'd be interested!

Next up, Chapter Ten: In which I finally give you 4/4 SBI content, and then do something that all of you are absolutely going to hate.

midnight wire

Chapter Notes

First off, my [wingfic](#) is out, if that's something you'd want to read! It's c!Wilbur-centric, very h/c heavy, and tbh I like how it turned out.

This is the longest chapter yet. I just. Ugh. I did want to ask, are y'all cool with chapters this length? Because they really are probably all going to be at least 6k from here on out, but I don't want to overwhelm you, so I could theoretically do more of the thing where chapters have a part one and a part two? If you have any strong opinions, let me know lol

Related to that, if this fic were to be divided into acts, next chapter would be the last chapter of Act I. I suppose you can consider this your cliffhanger warning. I will do my best to have the next chapter out on schedule, but I'm anticipating it being very long (more than usual, even), and its very important to the fic that I include everything that I plan to include, so it may take an extra week? Idk, we'll see how it goes

Also, thank you so much for all the comments and kudos! The support for this fic has been amazing, and I love y'all so much!

Sorry for the long beginning notes. Usually, I'd put all of this in the end notes, but uh. You'll see.

Content warnings for swearing, smoking mention, implied suicidal ideation, mentioned past suicide (Wilbur's).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's a waiting game, from there.

Because Sam says that they're likely to only have one shot at this, and Puffy seems inclined to agree with him, and they need to gather allies and make preparations and be as sure as they can be that all of them will come out the other end intact, which, when dealing with a giant egg that can mind control people, is never as certain as it sounds. So it's a waiting game, and Wilbur finds that Puffy and Sam are spearheading everything, and he is left mostly out of the loop.

Were things different, he might protest. But he is a long way from his general days, and he's not sure he has that in him anymore. Not sure he's capable of that kind of leadership. Not sure he would deserve such a position, even if he could successfully execute it.

And then there's the fact that Phil's around, and everyone's tiptoeing around everyone else, and Tommy is expressing his displeasure in glares and Tubbo makes himself scarce whenever

Phil is in the vicinity, and Phil himself barely seems to know how to make any overtures, so they're all at a standstill, an uneasy equilibrium that seems wont to fall apart at any minute. They are allies of necessity, of circumstance, but if it weren't for their common enemy, they would be scattering to the winds.

He knew, of course. He knew that somewhere between countries forming and countries falling, between exiles and alliances and betrayals and destruction, that they had all come undone at the seams. But it is one thing to know it and quite another to be confronted with it, to be confronted with sons who no longer trust in their father and a father who does not know how to speak to his sons, and they all believe that they are right and the others are wrong, and there is truth in everyone's perspective but that hardly matters if no one is willing to make the effort to understand.

So, here he is. On top of Tommy's house, just sitting. Listening to what crows remain—there are fewer, now, but still plenty—and concentrating on the breeze in his hair, the fresh scent of the grass. Little things, things to ground him, things that will continue to exist whether he has a functional family or not,

(whether he is here or not, and he should not be left alone to his devices at the moment, perhaps, but he does not want company, because company means Tommy's sullenness or Tubbo's avoidance or Phil's pained floundering, and he can't, he can't put up with it, and he's not going to make them put up with him)

(though that's not fair, it's not fair and he knows it's not, because they're worried about him, they are, and all the preparations and rushing about that everyone seems to be doing doesn't mean that Tommy hasn't stopped trying to talk to him about it, awkward and so very sincere, or that Phil is not shooting him worried glances when he thinks he's not looking)

and he wishes he had a cigarette. It's a terrible vice, but there was comfort to be found in the smell of it, back then, in the curl of the smoke in the air and in his lungs. It was something he had control over. Something to prove he was alive. Something to seek refuge in.

But he has no cigarettes, and he knows that if he tries to go to find some, people will start being concerned over him, more than usual, and he's tired of people treating him like he's made of glass, like he'll break if he hits the ground too hard or like he'll break *himself* if he's allowed to be alone for too long. Even now, he probably doesn't have too long before someone seeks him out. He'd better enjoy the peace while it lasts.

(he's still not being fair but it has been a bit longer, now, since his revival, and perhaps this bitterness has always been present, under the guilt and the grief and the determination to never unleash that side of himself again, perhaps it was there but masked, but whether it was or not, it is here now, and he has no idea whether he has the right to be angry but he is, he is, he *is*)

He has no cigarettes, and going through his inventory reveals nothing of note. He has the weapons that Tubbo gave him, though the longer he has possession of them, the more he dislikes them. He is more than capable of holding his own in a fight, but it is never his first choice, and the feel of the sword against the palm of his hand has begun to sicken him.

(or perhaps not the sword itself, but what he could do with it, the way he could paint the air with blood rather than words, because his words have gone dry and stale and he's not sure he will ever recover them)

(you could defend yourself but you don't like that much either you always liked a crossbow because if you failed to kill your enemy if your enemy reached you armorless as you were and your flesh ready for the blade's bite it was over it was all over and that's what you wanted and it is luck that you survived as long as you did survived to ruin it all and perhaps they would all have been better off for it if you were a little worse at aiming)

He doesn't have any blocks. No building materials, nothing crafted. No one seems keen on giving him anything to do. He could take the initiative himself, but that invites the same problem as trying to go off on his own. People worrying, fretting, Tommy telling him not to stress himself out and Puffy telling him that they've got a good handle on things.

He's still got those cornflowers. He pulls them out, turning them over in his hands, and experimentally crushes one. It takes so little effort to turn flowers into dye, and the petals stain his fingers and palm, streaks of blue standing out starkly against skin that is, perhaps, paler than it should be.

Blue. He likes the color. He crushes another flower. Breathes. Tries to just *be* for a little while. He never used to have much of an affinity for the color before,

(and there is a part of him that wants soft blue wool under his hands, warmth and safety and love unconditional and a friend that does not leave him, does not judge him, does not expect him to be anything other than what he is, but he pushes that part of himself down to suffocate because there is no time for that)

but some things linger, he supposes, even when he would rather they not. A liking for blue is not the worst thing rattling around in his brain.

A crow settles right next to him. He blinks, frowns, stares at it. It stares right back, almost accusatory.

He doesn't remember Phil's flock being so annoying in the past. But then, perhaps that's just another thing he has to get used to. More irritating birds, and more of them in general.

He sighs. "I can't say that I'm in the mood right now, Phil," he says.

"Oh, my mistake. I'll be sure to let Phil know." A low drawl, almost monotone, coming from directly behind him, and he jerks, twisting around, and it is not Phil at all. The bird lets out a caw that sounds distinctly smug, and then flaps its wings rapidly and takes off, but he's hardly paying attention, because of all the people to come looking for him up here, he didn't anticipate Technoblade.

"When did you get here?" he asks, too surprised to say anything else.

Techno snorts. He is decked out in blue rather than red, and Wilbur is struck by the resemblance to earlier days, different times, another server entirely. That was his first brush

with war, but it had all been in good fun, then, and when they'd had enough, they'd walked away. There is no walking away now, and there is something in Technoblade's stance that says he is well aware of it; there is a harshness to him now that has never been there before, even with all of the voices and all of the blood and the way he has been called to violence every day of his life.

Was he like that, in the tundra, those first hours after Wilbur returned? He remembers thinking he looked tired. He's not sure that he would have noticed anything else, then.

"As far as anyone else knows, I'm not yet," Techno says. "Thanks for the welcome."

"Sorry," he says. "I didn't mean—I was surprised. I wasn't expecting to see you, is all."

"Phil called," Techno offers, as if that explains everything. Perhaps it does. But then, there is a sardonic twist to his lips, a discontent in his eyes. "Said somethin' about an egg cult and makin' omelets." He shrugs. "If you've dragged Phil into this, might as well have me too."

"I didn't drag Phil into anything," he says. "He showed up on his own. He didn't have to."

"And what did you expect?" Techno asks. "That he'd just sit down and take radio silence from you? After everything?"

Anger flares, white-hot. Irrational, maybe, that this should be what does it, but the dam that holds him back is strewn with rotting planks.

"He seems to be just fine taking radio silence from Tommy," he snaps. "Why not me too? Why *not* me, after everything? After everything, what do you even mean, after everything? Do you mean after the two of you worked with Dream to destroy L'Manberg? Do you mean after you basically disowned Tommy for the high crime of standing by his best friend? Tell me what you mean, Techno, because honestly, I don't think that Phil or you has the right to demand anything from me or Tommy."

"I was talkin' about how you used Phil to commit assisted suicide five minutes after he set foot in the server," Techno replies evenly, "but sure, Wilbur, let's get into it." And to Wilbur's consternation, he gathers his cape around himself and sits to his side, about a meter away. "I wasn't going to talk about Tommy, but you want to talk about Tommy? Fine, let's talk about Tommy. I have a whole list."

"You have a—what?"

"I'm sick of bein' used, Wilbur," Technoblade says, and his voice is still even, still cool, still lacking even a trace of anger, and perhaps that is the scariest part. "That's all you and Tommy ever seem to do, these days, is use me. I don't know how many times I have to say that I'm not a weapon before people start to get it, but it hasn't worked yet. I have to admit, I'm tired of tryin'." He fixes him with a stare. Wilbur feels rooted to the spot. "So let's talk about Tommy, Wilbur. Do I regret not bein' there for him before? Sure. But I tried when I could, and he threw that away. And I wouldn't have minded if he'd sided against me from the start. But I laid it all out in front of him, and he chose to join me, and then he chose to betray me. That's a choice that he made."

“You were destroying something that mattered to him!” he exclaims. “You were hurting his friends! What did you expect him to do?”

“I expected him not to turn on me. *Again*. That’s all you and he have done since you came to this server. You bring me in to deal with your messes, and then you get all shocked and outraged when I do what I *said* I was going to do the whole time.” He shakes his head. He’s still not angry. He’s still not angry, though from his words, he definitely should be. But instead, there is resignation. Perhaps some acerbity. But not anger. “I wasn’t going to get into this. I didn’t want to get into this. But I’m not here for you, Wilbur. I’m here because Phil asked me, and that’s all. I’ll help with your omelet, but that’s *all*. I’m finished. I tried to be finished a long time ago, but you all kept dragging me back in.”

“Does it not matter to you, then?” he asks. “Any of what came before? Any of the old days?”

Techno raises an eyebrow. “Course it does,” he says frankly. “Let me ask you something, Wilbur, when exactly did you stop seeing me as a person with feelings?”

It’s clear that he’s not expecting an answer. And still: that pervasive resignation. Wilbur feels his animosity draining away, replaced by numbness.

(this is on him, isn’t it? he brought Techno here, he recruited him into the first war, he promised him anarchy when he had no intention of delivering, he provoked the first rift, it was all him, him, him, and the worst part of all of it is that he cannot deny any of what Technoblade is saying)

(because they all have their truths, and the problem lies in the refusal to understand. wasn’t he just thinking about this?)

“That’s where I stand, then,” Techno says, turning his head away to face forward, toward the rest of the SMP. There are blood vines visible from this vantage, if you squint just enough. “I thought you should know.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “I didn’t want to fight.”

“Neither did I,” Techno says. “But sayin’ ‘I didn’t want to’ never seems to accomplish much of anything.”

Wilbur doesn’t have anything to say to that. He flexes his fingers, stares down at his hands, still covered in blue. Blue, blue, blue. If he were Ghostbur, he would smile and chirp something untactful and naive, and perhaps it would not make Technoblade happy, but it would take away the resignation, at least, would distract him from—would distract him from what? The way he seems to expect his family members to treat him as a tool for their own ends? There is no distracting from that. And as much as Wilbur would like to deny it, he cannot say that Technoblade is wrong,

(a history: he and his brother sparring on the grass, he and his brother tormenting Tommy, he and his brother on opposite sides of a grand war, but having so much fun with it, every clash underlain by quick-flash smiles and inside jokes and the knowledge that despite it all, they are still there for each other)

(a different history: summoning the Blade to fight in their war, digging the Blade a pit to fight Tommy in, stringing the Blade along with promises of anarchy, of a tyrant toppled, knowing full well that the Blade will not like the end result, knowing full well that he intends to betray everyone in the end, knowing full well, knowing full well, knowing full well that he will not have to deal with any of the consequences at all because he intends to end his own story without regard for the people still living in it)

“I am sorry,” he says, and this time, he means something entirely different. “For what it’s worth.”

Technoblade sighs. “I am too,” he says. “For what it’s worth. Not for all of it. I’d do a lot of it again. But for the things that are worth bein’ sorry for?” He looks to the sky. Wilbur wonders if he’s counting the crows, as he has taken to doing himself. “I’ve got plenty of regrets. Don’t mistake me there.” He sighs again. “Maybe there’s somethin’ to be worked out, yet. But nobody’s ready for that. I’m not ready for that. I would be astounded if Tommy was ready for that. You don’t seem all that ready for that. So how about we make an omelet and save the rest for later?”

It’s not what he wants. But perhaps it’s not what Technoblade wants, either, and perhaps that is a good sign.

Prime, what a mess they all are.

“Alright,” he says. “Omelet.” And as if summoned by his words, he spots a figure coming down the path toward Tommy’s house. Or, wait—two figures. One is easily distinguishable as Puffy, but he’s not sure about the other, not from this distance. They have dark hair, and they’re wearing a lot of white, and—is that a headband?

Wait.

“Is that Sapnap?” Techno asks doubtfully.

“What the fuck,” he says.

Puffy better have a *damn* good reason for this.

The reason is, apparently, this: Sapnap stands before all of them and says, with fire in his eyes and white-knuckled fists, that he barely recognizes the man that Bad has turned into, that the Egg has made him become. That he’s been busy at home, with his fiances—and how interesting it is, to learn that Sapnap and Karl, of all people, are Quackity’s fiances—and that he didn’t see a good opportunity to do anything about it before now, but if they’re taking the fight to the Egg, he wants in.

“The Bad I know would never have pulled any of this bullshit,” he declares. “He basically raised me. I know him better than to think this is *him*. So yeah, mark me down for whatever you’ve got planned.”

And isn’t that achingly familiar.? Except for Sapnap, the positions are reversed: he is the son trying to talk sense into the father, trying to save him, rather than the other way around. He conspicuously does not make eye contact with Phil, who is standing off to the side, Ranboo hovering near him—did he arrive with Techno?—hunched over and looking like he’d really rather be anywhere else.

They’re gathered on the Prime Path outside of Tommy’s house once again. It’s become a de facto meeting place, of sorts, which is strange to him. Tommy himself has always been central to events on the server, but his little dirt hut? Wilbur has never spent so much time here before, and he doesn’t think anyone else has, either. Regardless, they’re all here, Puffy next to Sapnap and Sam come down from the prison, Phil and Ranboo, Tommy and Tubbo both very obviously glaring at Technoblade, who has taken up most everyone’s attention by his sudden arrival. He doesn’t think Sapnap has spotted him yet, lurking around the edges of the conversation as he is, but if Sapnap’s going to be here, he might as well get this over with.

“And we should trust you why?” he asks, stepping forward smoothly, in the way he knows makes his coat flare out just so. If no one else is going to ask, he will.

(it’s not paranoia if it’s common sense, it’s not, he’s being careful, he’s watching himself, it’s easy to trip but he hasn’t yet)

Sapnap jerks, all the color draining from his face as he turns. His eyebrows furrow, his lips parting, and Wilbur can see the gears turning in his head as he tries to make sense of what he’s seeing, tries to make sense of a dead man walking.

“Holy shit,” he says. “You’re—”

Something settles. Old patterns emerge. Here is someone he doesn’t have to watch himself with. Perhaps not an enemy, not anymore, but no friend, no one he cares to keep close.

(he fought by Sapnap’s side once but that was a thin alliance and he was hardly concerned with just who had flocked to his banner, not anymore, not when he’d already made the decision to betray them all, to light the fuse no matter what)

“Yes, yes,” he says, airily waving a hand. “Hello, I’m alive, back by unpopular demand, all of that. I need a guarantee that you’re not under the influence. Being close to Bad gives you a good motive to come and help, I’ll grant you, but it also means that you could be infected through your proximity to him. I’m sure you understand my caution.”

(the words are back, dripping off his tongue like fine wine, like rich confidence)

“He’s—” Puffy starts, but Sapnap’s voice overlaps with hers.

“Wait, am I the only one who didn’t know about this?” he asks. “You’re just—back? Alive again? How the hell did that happen?”

“Not particularly relevant,” he says. “I assure you, it’s something we’re all grappling with at the moment. Would you answer the question?”

Sapnap is still gaping. “I—I *guess*, I mean, I’ve only been near the Egg once. Bad’s tried to get me to get close a couple of times, but I always give him an excuse. I don’t know how you want me to prove that.”

He lifts a shoulder, half a shrug. “And your fiances? They’re not here because—?”

“Karl hasn’t been feeling great lately,” he bites out. “Completely unrelated to the Egg. But Q’s staying with him for now. I also don’t want either of them anywhere near this thing. Can you blame me for that?”

Against his will, he glances at Tommy and Tubbo, the former of whom still glaring at Technoblade, shock and rage warring on his face, and the latter of whom seeming to want to look anywhere *except* at Technoblade.

(you want to keep them safe you want to keep them far away but they will not go because the fight is in their blood and this is what you have made them into and the battlefield is different but they still will not leave it and they were adventurous as children to be sure but you did the rest and you know it you cannot protect them and you have only yourself to blame)

“Alright, then,” he says. “I’m not the one to welcome you aboard. But welcome aboard.”

“Okay!” Puffy says, clapping her hands together. She’s scowling, slightly, and Wilbur realizes that they’ve pretty much been running roughshod all over her. “Thanks for that, Wilbur. As you can see, Sapnap, we’ve got a bunch of war criminals, former dead people, irritating little twerps, and Tubbo, but we’re all working together and not provoking anyone more than we need to, because taking down the evil mind control egg is what takes precedence here.” She shoots a glare at him as she speaks, which frankly, he feels isn’t entirely justified. He wasn’t provoking Sapnap. He would have said a lot worse if he was trying to provoke Sapnap.

“While I’m at it, hi, Technoblade,” Puffy adds. “Glad you could make it. Just, nobody blow up any city-states while we’re here and we’ll be fine, okay?”

“I will make no promises,” Technoblade says, “but as long as you’re not hiding a new one from me, we should be good.”

“Oh my *god*,” Tommy breaks in. Wilbur’s surprised he’s abstained this long. “Why the fuck are you like this? You can’t just barge in here and claim to be all about helping now and expect us all to go along with it. You blew up L’Manberg! You and him!” He jabs a finger at Phil. “You worked with Dream! You, with your stupid withers, over and over again! And you just think you can come back and butt in here like none of that happened? I mean, maybe you can, since I guess no one’s trying to lock you up over it, but that doesn’t mean it’s fair, and it doesn’t mean that you get to be so fucking, so fucking *like that* about it! Like none of it fucking matters.”

It's curious to watch everyone's reactions. They don't all have a stake in it, not the way that Tommy does, not the way that Tubbo does, not the way that Wilbur does. Sapnap doesn't seem to know how to react, and Sam's fingers are clenched around his trident. Puffy just looks tired, which he supposes is fair. He doesn't think she's paid enough to put up with their bullshit. Because that's what it is: their bullshit. To be sure, all of the things that Tommy is saying apply to everyone; he's talking about general crimes, actions that Techno has taken that have affected the whole server. But Tommy's not concerned about how they affected the whole server. He's concerned about himself, and Tubbo. That's all.

(he can't blame him, not when he's the exact same way. he wouldn't be upset with them at all, wouldn't care one whit about the ruin of the country that once was his, if it weren't for the fact that Tommy and Tubbo were hurt over it)

He meets Puffy's eyes. Jerks his head at her. *Go*, he says without saying it, and she nods.

"I'm going to show Sapnap some of the stuff we've been working on," she says. "C'mon, Sam. Oh, Ranboo, you too, if you want."

"Oh." Ranboo sounds surprised to be addressed. Which is fair, considering that Wilbur forgot that he was there entirely. "Um, sure, I guess. Glad to uh, glad to help out." He casts an uncertain glance at Phil, looking for cues, and that should tell him all he needs to know about their relationship right there,

(and he's not jealous, he's not jealous, he's not, not jealous that Phil has picked up another kid because this is just how Phil is and there's no need to be jealous and having another brother might be nice, actually, but why would he do this when Tommy is right here and so clearly in need of support, and *why* would he drag another child into the mess that is their family in the first place?)

because Phil nods at him reassuringly, and Ranboo follows along with Puffy and Sam and Sapnap as they leave the rest of them alone on the Prime Path in what has to be the least subtle statement of *here's some space so you guys can talk about your family issues* that Wilbur has ever witnessed.

Techno was right. They're not ready for this conversation. But they're going to start it.

"So, what exactly is the problem here?" Techno asks, in exactly the tone of voice that will not help at all, lazy and unaffected. And Wilbur knows he knows better than that, so it has to be on purpose. "You rattled off a lot, there, and I wasn't takin' notes."

Tommy lets out an inarticulate screech of rage and starts forward, hands clenched into fists. But Tubbo reaches out and grabs his shirt sleeve, and he stops in his tracks.

"You know what the fucking problem is," he spits. "I fucking hate you. You're terrible, and you're the worst, and I want to never see your face again."

"Oh, so I'll just leave you to fight a bloodthirsty Egg cult by yourself?" Techno says. He raises an eyebrow. "Sorry, Tommy, no can do. I've been told they're calling themselves the Eggpire. That's right up my alley."

“Yeah, maybe you fucking should!” Tommy yells. “Maybe you should leave! I don’t want you here! Tubbo doesn’t want you here! We don’t need you, either of you! We’ve been doing just fine all on our own, and now we’ve got Wil back, so we doubly don’t need you! We never have! You haven’t—you haven’t been here before, so why should you suddenly start being here now, huh? Why don’t you just fuck off back to your, your stupid snow fort and your stupid dogs and leave the rest of us alone?”

Phil closes his eyes. The picture of weariness.

Wilbur considers stepping in.

(not yet)

(Tommy needs this)

“I literally just told you why?” Techno says. “Have your listenin’ and comprehension skills gotten this bad? I’m not sure why you’re mad at *me*, Tommy, you’re the one who used me as a weapon and betrayed me. *Again*. Feels like I’m preachin’ to the choir, here.”

“I didn’t—” Tommy squawks. “I couldn’t just let you *do* that to everyone! Why don’t you fucking understand how shitty of a thing that was to do? You destroyed L’Manberg, Technoblade. That was people’s home. That was my home! That was the place, it was the place that Wilbur created, it was Wilbur’s country, and it mattered so much to all of us, and you fucking destroyed it like it was nothing.”

(he thinks you wanted it to be here why does he think that does he not remember what you did what you wanted you wanted it gone and if anything Technoblade fulfilled your greatest desire)

“Well, gee, Tommy, I don’t know,” Techno says, “maybe if L’Manberg didn’t want to get its ass kicked, L’Manberg should’ve left me in retirement, where I was completely content to live out the rest of my days in peace. Or *maybe*, and consider this, they shouldn’t have set up a corrupt and tyrannical dictatorship just like the last one was.”

Tubbo has gone pale. His face is blank. “I’m right here, you know,” he says.

“I see you,” Technoblade says. “I don’t see you arguin’.”

“Would it do any good?” Tubbo asks. “You’ve made up your mind. Not like it can make a difference now.”

“Of course he’s made up his mind!” Tommy says. “He’s a stubborn fucking *pig*. He thinks he knows everything, and he doesn’t give a shit when people tell him he’s wrong, because he’s the great Technoblade and Technoblade is never wrong, and he doesn’t *care* about people, he just cares about his stupid fucking anarchy and his stupid fucking fights, and nothing else matters to him.”

It is Wilbur’s turn to want to close his eyes. But he doesn’t let himself look away.

Technoblade’s face darkens.

(he understands, he understands how Tommy can accuse him of not caring, he understands, but at the same time, he doesn't, because they grew up together, the three of them, so Tommy should know better, should know better than to think Techno an unfeeling creature, because Techno cares deeply and abidingly and desperately loyally, and that is why he despises betrayal so very much, because it is so rare for someone to grant him the same amount of regard and trust that he is prone to giving away. Tommy ought to know that, so how can it be possible that the events of this server have washed away years of shared history?)

"Okay, I think everyone needs to calm down," Phil says, but Tommy wheels on him just as quickly.

"Don't you fucking tell me to calm down," he snaps. "You don't have the fucking right. You did all the same things that he did. All the same things, when I thought—" He cuts himself off suddenly, shaking his head, grimacing like he was about to give something away.

"Nevermind what I thought. But I went through hell, and you weren't there for me. Neither of you were there for me. In the end, I had to claw my way out myself, no thanks to either of you. So I don't know where you get off coming around here and claiming to want to help when you've never done shit to help me before."

"I let you—" Techno begins incredulously, but then Phil strides forward, closing the gap between them, and Techno falls silent.

"I'm sorry," Phil says simply. "I'm sorry for a lot. I can't say that I'm sorry for L'Manberg, because that, I'd do again. But I'm sorry for hurting you. And most of all, I'm sorry for not being there for you when you needed me. Either of you," he adds, with a glance at Tubbo. Tubbo doesn't react. "I honestly didn't think you'd want to see me, after what I did to Wil. By the time I realized how badly I'd fucked up, it was a bit late to do anything about it." His mouth twists. "I don't have anything more to offer than that. I can't change the past. But I'd like to start making it up to you, if you'll let me."

Tommy stares at him for a long moment. And then turns on his heel and marches off after Puffy and the rest.

Silence falls.

"For the record," Tubbo says, "I'm not too mad anymore. But really, that's just because he's mad enough for both of us. And being angry all the time is really exhausting, you know?"

Tommy calls over his shoulder: "Tubbo, come on, let's go make fun of Ranboo!"

Tubbo gives them all one last, searching stare. And then follows Tommy.

Silence again. Even the crows are quiet.

"That could have gone better," Phil murmurs.

"Look on the bright side," he offers, and Phil looks at him, eyes dark. "It could also have gone worse. He could have tried to kill you."

“Couldn’t help but notice you not bein’ of any help,” Techno says.

“And who was I supposed to help?” he asks, and laughs, not bothering to hide the acidity. “You two? Maybe. I’m pissed at you, but that’s for Tommy’s sake, not L’Manberg’s. I probably should have helped him; Prime knows he needs the support. But at the same time, he’s hardly seeing things clearly either. None of us are. We’re all very fucked up, I’ve noticed.”

The last is supposed to be a joke, or at least, something to lighten the mood a little, because he can’t stand Phil looking so tired and old. But Phil just sighs, something miserable flashing in his gaze.

“And besides,” he continues, softening his tone a bit, “Tommy needed to be able to say all of that himself. He didn’t need me speaking for him or defending him. He needed to air all that out.”

“Do you think there’s hope?” Phil asks. He’s still standing stock still, gazing out over the path in front of him, though Tommy and Tubbo have both passed from sight.

“I really don’t think I’m the one to ask about that,” he says. “But you’re here, yeah? You’ve apologized, and you’re going to try to make things right? I’m not accepting anything on Tommy’s behalf, but it seems like a good first step.”

Phil doesn’t answer. Technoblade makes a low noise that is not quite a scoff, but when Wilbur glances at him, the expression on his face is contemplative rather than angry, rather than derisive. And it’s a start. It’s a start. It has to be a start.

(because if it isn’t if things carry on in this way you’re going to have to choose between them and you already know what your decision will be but it will hurt you will break you to tear out those connections at the roots and no one can be more important to you than Tommy is but you still want Phil you still want Techno no matter their faults no matter what they’ve done they are still your family and you don’t want to have to choose but brace yourself Icarus there is always a fall and the storm wall hasn’t blown through yet)

The plan, in the end, is a simple one: they’re going to gear up, take a shit ton of weapons and firepower, and do their damndest to crack the Egg’s shell wide open.

There are more complicated factors, of course. The Egg is not a natural thing, and they don’t know what kind of defenses it may have. They also don’t know whether harming the Egg will harm the people under its influence, so that is something to watch for; Puffy and Sam are both insistent that if that happens, they abort the attack immediately.

(though he and Phil meet each other’s eyes across the room, and he knows they are thinking the same thing, thinking about the nature of conflicts such as these and the necessity of

sacrifices)

It's not a particularly solid plan, but it's the best they can come up with, under the circumstances, and they're prepared as they're going to be. Wilbur doesn't object to it in theory.

But in practice—

"The fuck do you mean, I'm not coming?" he demands.

Puffy meets his gaze head on.

"We need someone on the outside, watching to see if they bring in reinforcements, or if any other weird stuff happens," she says. "Sam volunteered, but Sam also needs to be at the prison to make sure no one takes advantage of this to try a prison break or something, and he can't really afford to divide his time. That leaves you."

"That leaves—what about one of the literal children?" he asks. "You're fine with bringing the minors near the fucking mind control egg cult?"

"Obviously I'm not fine with it," she says, "but if I told them to stay behind, they'd follow us in anyway, except I wouldn't know where they were in order to protect them. This way, everyone knows exactly where everyone else is."

"Damn straight we would," Tommy mutters, and Wilbur wheels on him.

"And what the hell are *you* thinking?" he asks. "Why would you—"

Tommy glances away from him, and all at once, he understands. His chest goes cold.

(red in his mind and red in his heart and the world aflame and he raises his sword)

"You don't want me to come," he states.

"I—look, Wilbur? I don't want to lose you, okay? And I can't hear the fucking thing, and you can, and I don't—I couldn't stand it, if what happened last time happened again. I don't want to go through that, and I especially don't want you to go through that. Not again. So, yeah, I'd rather you be just outside, so that we can call you if we need you, or you can call if you need us, but I would feel a whole lot better if you didn't go in there."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Phil open his mouth to ask something, and then shut it again, his brow furrowed.

The thing is—the thing is, he understands. He understands where Tommy is coming from. If their positions were reversed, he would want the same thing. But it stings, like splinters in his heart, and he tries to tell himself that Tommy is just worried about him, that Tommy just wants to keep him safe, but that is bad enough, because it should be the other way around, should be him protecting Tommy, should be him keeping Tommy safe, and it smarts to know that Tommy doesn't think he's capable of doing even that much.

(but he is right, of course, right to doubt him, right to keep him at arms' length, because he has proven himself susceptible to the whispering and the enticement and Tommy is right to look him in the eyes and tell him to stay behind)

"We're taking a whole lot of holy water with us, just in case," Puffy says. "So in case of an emergency, it'll probably be fine. But I agree with Tommy. I think for *your* sake, this is where you can do the most good."

"Right," he says, and his voice sounds hollow to his own ears. "Right, no, yeah, I get it. I can do lookout."

(you were their general and how you have fallen)

(they do not trust you and they are right not to)

"Wil—" Tommy starts, but he shakes his head rapidly, cutting him off.

"No, I'm serious, it's good. You're probably right." He smiles, or at least goes through the motions; his lips curve upward, at any rate. "Can't say that I'm eager for a repeat either. But you've got to promise that you will call me in if you need me."

"Course we will," Tommy says, and he

(doesn't believe him he's lying he's lying he's lying)

nods. That's the best he's going to get.

There's not much to say after that. Sam wishes them luck and returns to the prison. The rest of them head off toward the Egg, and he holds his head high and his back straight and pretends there is no shame curling in his gut, no wounded animal clawing at his chest, no hurt, no fear, no bitterness. And he pretends that he does not feel the weight of Phil's gaze on his shoulders, curious and concerned. Phil has not been told about his encounter with the Egg, no details, at least, and he would like to keep it that way, if he can. So he pretends not to see, and he pretends that the growing density of the vines as they march forward does not strike a chord of

(longing)

dread in his heart.

There is no reason to worry, probably. Techno and Phil are armed to the teeth, and Puffy is no lightweight, and they will all work to keep the kids safe. And Tommy and Tubbo themselves are very capable, even though they shouldn't have to be, and he doesn't know Ranboo very well

(though there is something terribly eerie in his bearing, at the moment, in the way he almost seems to be taller, in the blank, glazed look in his eyes, in his almost mechanical movements, and it is very unsettling but perhaps the kid is just nervous)

but he lives with Techno and Phil, so he must have some measure of skill.

So it'll be fine. It's going to be fine.

He wishes he could persuade himself. But he can't, not on the way there, and not after they arrive, not after they leave him at the top of the ladder with several bottles of holy water and a repeated promise to let him know if something goes wrong. Not after they all descend the ladder, out of sight.

He is alone.

He tries to breathe, tries to steady his nerves. He used to be better than this. He used to be able to go into battle without this anxiety clanging in his bones. But he can't stop remembering

(red red red and *don't you want peace, brave heart, don't you want to rest*)

the previous ordeal, and they all took holy water with them, but what if that isn't enough? What if the Egg worms its way inside their heads regardless of the precautions? What if the Egg takes Technoblade? What if the Egg takes *Phil*?

He takes to obsessively checking his communicator, only placing it down for a few seconds at a time before picking it up again and searching for new messages. There is nothing, and he tries to tell himself that radio silence is a good thing, that it means they're not in danger, but before fifteen minutes pass, he's about ready to jump down the ladder himself, regardless of the risk, regardless of the consequences.

It *grates*, being left up here on his own, like a child that can't be trusted with his own safety, when the literal, actual children went down there, could be fighting for their lives right now.

(and it was one thing to be left out of planning, because he doesn't *want* to be a general anymore, not really, doesn't want to be a leader, not when it all brought him to such grief, but it is one thing to let others take charge and quite enough to be left out entirely)

(*they're pulling away they're abandoning you they know what you are and this is just the excuse*)

He sighs noisily, running a hand through his hair. Sets the communicator down. Picks it up again.

It's going to be fine. It's going to be—

There's a message.

He reads it. Once, twice, three times, just to make sure he's not hallucinating, that it's real, that the words glaring up at him, swimming in front of his eyes, aren't some error, some mistake, aren't a glitch with the worst possible timing. He blinks, hard, but they remain the same, and terror reaches into his chest and stops his heart.

(*there is something very wrong at the heart of this server the beating living heart is choked and stuttering staccato black with poison and clotted with misery and you can see it in the sky can smell it on the wind and in that cell that obsidian cell where the walls weep and the*

lava enters your nose and lingers you knew it you saw it there is poison creeping a monster waiting and the monster is loose and he is coming and death on his footstep and it is as the tide and the tide must always return and the tides are black and cold and they want you to drown)

The words are still there.

Awesamdude was slain by Dream.

Without a second thought, he grips the top rung of the ladder and vaults over the side.

Chapter End Notes

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[My tumblr](#)

Next up, Chapter Eleven: In which the chips are down, the opponent queen has put itself back on the board, and Wilbur is trying to win solitaire with less than a full deck of cards.

(Or: some truths make themselves known. And the shit hits the fan.)

take a drink of that promise land

Chapter Notes

11.8k chapter my abhorred. This chapter fought me literally every step of the way, but here it is! It's done! I really hope it lives up to expectations. Posting it a little earlier in the day than I usually do, because today is the 16th and I am Scared.

Also, sorry I didn't get around to answering comments this time, folks! I haven't had very much time over the past few weeks to formulate replies, but I still read each and every one. So even if I don't answer yours (now or at any point in the future), please know that I still love you for leaving one! A whole lot! I really value your feedback, it means the world to me!

Content warnings this chapter for swearing, manipulation, mind control, blood, violence, suicidal ideation, panic attacks, and temporary character death. Take care of yourselves for this one. Take breaks if you need them.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His thoughts fly apart. His heart pounds in tandem with his feet. There is room for one thing in his mind and one thing only, the words curling around themselves, the end running into the beginning, and it's *Sam is dead and Dream is coming Sam is dead is dead is dead and Dream is coming Sam is dead and Dream is is is—*

And under that, Sam's words echo: *As long as I live, he will never set foot outside this prison.* Delivered with such confidence, meant to be a reassurance, a promise. But Sam is dead.

He bursts into the Egg's chamber at a dead sprint. And then draws up short, eyes darting around the room. There: Puffy, arguing with Bad, Sapnap by her side. Next to Bad: Ant, Punz, Ponk. Standing back from the Egg a bit: Tommy, Tubbo, Techno, Phil, Ranboo, a measure of distance between the former two and the latter three.

But they're all alright. None of them are bloodstained. There are no cries of pain. No clash of weapons. No eyes gone blank and empty, no items scattered across the floor to indicate a first or second death. They're all alright, haven't even come to blows yet, it seems, and for a moment, Wilbur is the only one in the room who knows. He is the messenger, and he must deliver the news, even though he doesn't want to, doesn't want to voice it, doesn't want to make it real. It's a crushing weight in his chest, stealing his breath, making his head spin. He holds his communicator tightly in his hand, a death grip. Checking it one last time changes nothing. The words are still there.

No one's seen him yet.

“—did not sign up for this,” Techno is saying, an aside to Phil that he doesn’t bother to keep at a murmur. “I’m here to fight, not watch a domestic dispute. This is really awkward, Phil. They’re just screamin’ at each other.”

“Feels a bit scuffed,” Phil agrees, voice slightly distant. His eyes are fixed on the Egg, his fingers absently fiddling with his sword hilt.

“Dream’s coming,” Wilbur says.

He doesn’t say it as loudly as he intends. His voice cracks slightly on the second word. But the room goes silent, and all eyes turn to him

(and it’s a terrible imitation of things that once were, of his voice strident and powerful and his words potent and inspiring, and his speeches commanded armies, once, led people to die for him, but this is not that, and he is as much a harbinger as the crow that perches on Philza’s shoulders)

at once.

“What?” Tommy says, his voice a pale shadow.

Mutely, he holds out his communicator, as though they can read the print from this distance. But it provokes all of them into pulling out theirs, and he watches the transformation, watches the realization dawn. Watches Techno raise an eyebrow, watches Phil frown, watches Puffy’s face contort in visceral horror. Watches Tommy mouth the words to himself, disbelieving. Watches him look up, make eye contact, and there is a sheen in his eyes, a desperation for this to be untrue, and he wishes he could give him what he wants. Wishes he could say that this is some kind of prank, a joke in poor taste.

If there is anyone laughing, it isn’t him.

“Well, shit,” Phil says.

“No,” Tommy says, “no, no, no, no, no, there’s no way, the prison is supposed to be secure, there’s no way this is real, oh holy shit, holy shit what are we going to do—”

“Does this have to mean he’s out?” Tubbo asks, practically a plea. His ears have folded back, almost plastered against his skull. “There’s no way that he could still be in there? And that he just, got in a lucky shot or something?”

It’s a possibility, technically. A possibility that Sam let his guard down around the prisoner, that Dream somehow managed to overpower him, even after months in solitary confinement, muscles atrophying, managed to get one over the man armed to the teeth and wearing full netherite armor. A possibility, but not a likely one, and he knows in his heart of hearts that it isn’t true, knows that

(you looked at that mask at that blank smiling mask and you did not need to look in his eyes to know what lurked did there did not need to look to feel his gaze crawling down your back and you bloodied his nose and yet he looked on you like dirt like an insect like a puppet)

Sam would never have been so careless. If Sam is dead, has lost a life to Dream, then Dream is out.

“How could this have happened?” Puffy asks. “Sam would never have let his guard down!” There is more than fear lining her words, but Wilbur can’t pay her much attention now. Because Tommy’s breaths are coming in quick, shallow, edged with a hint of a whine, and he knows very well the beginnings of a panic attack when he sees one.

(and it was never supposed to happen to Tommy to his little brother to his baby brother and he doesn’t know if it was the war but if not the war it was everything that came after and the blame all comes circling back to him in the end)

Phil steps forward, concern written on his face, but Wilbur brushes past him.

“Tommy,” he says, and takes Tommy’s hand in his, keeping his grasp light and loose, so that Tommy can break away if he wants, “breathe with me, alright? In and out.” He breathes, loud and exaggerated, and it is a miracle that he can keep the rhythm steady when he was so scared only a moment ago, when he still is scared, when he expects footsteps to echo down the corridor at any moment, the worst nightmare become reality. But this is for Tommy, and for Tommy, he can put aside his own fears, can forget where they are and what they’re doing and push away the growing static and do what needs to be done. Do what he has promised to do.

Tommy grips his hand so hard he can almost hear his bones creaking. But gradually, he comes back, and his darting eyes focus on his face, clarity shining back through, though the fear does not dissipate.

“He is going to have to go through all of us before he gets to you,” Wilbur says lowly. Another promise. This one, he will be better about keeping to the letter. But Tommy shudders.

“That’s what I’m fucking scared of,” he says, in a voice that tries to be harsh but instead just sounds young.

(child soldiers, child soldiers, lives too short and graves too long)

“I’m not going to let anything happen,” he says, and wishes Tommy would believe him. But he cannot fault him for his lack of faith. Not after anything. Not after he’s grown so accustomed to family letting him down time and time again, not when he’s grown so accustomed to being burnt every time he extends a hand. Wilbur has wielded that fire himself. He can hear it even now, crackling around the edges of his consciousness, held at bay now only because he can see its destructiveness for what it is, can look past the horrible glory to the inglorious horror.

Or. No. That’s the Egg. The crackling is whispers.

He’d almost forgotten. He’s been focused on the other problem, almost forgetting about the first. But the Egg is here, gleaming red, pulsing, blood-drenched. He blinks, and his vision

wavers, and there is blood beading on its surface like condensation, like dew, rolling down its sides and pooling beneath it. Spreading outward. Reaching for him.

People are talking. Discussing.

“He’s not going to go through all of us,” Techno is saying. “Don’t be so dramatic. He’s not that good. And he’s homeless again. I’m not goin’ down to some homeless man.”

“Do we even know that he’s coming here?” Phil asks. “He wouldn’t have any way of knowing where we are, right?”

Bad is soaked in it, soaked in the blood, and Ant, and Punz, and Ponk are soaked in it, and it is creeping up onto everyone else, staining their trousers, and he can hear the whispers, can hear the promises, can hear it again he can hear it again—

Sing blood, sing fire, it says to him, sing a requiem, sing of sleep, sing of what you want, if only you choose, if only you give in, I can give you all you’ve wanted, I can fulfill your dreams, and you ran once but you have returned to me now and I am in your blood and so is the fire and so is the void and you cannot deny yourself for long, gunpowder child.

(please not again please not again please no he won’t he won’t he won’t)

Tommy yanks on his arm.

“Wilbur,” he hisses.

(it asked you to hurt Tommy it asked you once and it will ask you again stop listening to it stop stop stop)

He blinks again, and the blood is gone, though the room is still bathed in red, from the egg and from the lava. Tommy is pressing something into his hand, a bottle of holy water, and Wilbur takes it with only a second of hesitation. The water goes down cool and fresh, and his mind clears. Not all the way. But enough. The whispers dissipate back into the static, indistinguishable from white noise.

“Sorry,” he says.

“Just keep your head on straight, big man,” Tubbo says, and—oh, it’s Tubbo who gave him the water. Tommy’s still holding his hand, but Tubbo’s pressed close to both of them, and whether he’s looking to protect or to be protected, Wilbur doesn’t know. Perhaps both.

“So obviously, this changes things,” Ant is saying, slow and considering.

“Does it?” Puffy asks.

“Of course,” Bad says. “We think that Dream should be in prison just as much as you do. He did bad things. He should be locked up.” He pauses, tilting his head, and Wilbur thinks that this is the most like the old Bad that he’s sounded. “So, how about we have a truce? We work together to take care of this, and maybe you’ll see how much the Egg can help, and then we won’t have to fight at all!”

“Right, because teaming with the people we were about to commit extreme violence against five minutes ago is a great plan,” Techno says. “I don’t see what could go wrong with that at all.”

Wilbur’s glad he said it. He understands the idea, of course, understands the concept of the enemy of my enemy is my friend, but he cannot work with those he does not trust, and he does not trust Bad or Ant or Punz not to stick a blade in his back as soon as he dares to turn it. Wouldn’t, even if there weren’t a mind control egg involved, even if they didn’t follow the very thing that has attempted to coerce him into betraying the only thing left he holds dear, the only people. Even if he still didn’t feel the thing sticking its tendrils into his mind, trying to find purchase.

He takes another swig of water. Tries to loosen his grip on the neck of the bottle, and fails.

“I don’t know that we have a choice,” Puffy says. Her shoulders slump. “If Dream is coming, we can’t be fighting among ourselves. We have to present a united front. Anything less, and he’ll walk all over us.” Her face is tight, but there is no real fear in it. Just pain. Perhaps regret.

(and you know that face you have seen it before that is the face of a parent who believes they have failed their child their light their beloved gone wrong and snuffed out and unrecognizable and they wonder if they could have stopped it and do not know which answer would be worse)

And as if the words are a summons, there are footsteps.

Footsteps. Unhurried, casual. Echoing down the corridor, loud as drumbeats, loud as a death knell. Footsteps, and the room goes quiet, unnaturally so. The Egg, that constant hum, stops, and that is the most terrifying thing of all. The world balances on the edge of a coin, teetering, ready to fall one way or the other. An anvil hangs overhead, waiting for the lever to be pulled, an anvil if the anvil knew the taste of blood and longed for it. An anvil if the anvil delighted in the death it caused.

(that day is blurry and out of focus, all its darkest implications slipping from Ghostbur’s memories like butter. he remembers showing Friend to Techno. and he remembers a flash of gold, brilliant and consuming and orienting the sky on a new axis. was the idea planted then, he wonders? the possibility that Ghostbur sought out so ardently? trade a ghost for a villain and try not to count too dearly the cost?)

“Shit,” Phil mutters, and just like that, everyone in the room takes on a defensive position, eyes trained on the entrance, half-hidden by vines as it is. Phil and Techno shift closer together, in sync as they always are. The Egg’s cohorts bunch up together. Sapnap strides forward a few paces, standing just a bit in front of everyone else, and no one moves to stop him, not with the scowl his lips are twisted into, not with the ready way he holds his sword.

(he is coming he is coming dark and twisted the poison at the core and you are all out of time)

Wilbur places himself between the entrance and the boys. It probably says something that they don't try to stop him, that Tommy doesn't call him out for babying him, that Tubbo doesn't protest.

The sword falls into his hand. He hates

(himself, what he can do with it, but he has no crossbow so he must carry something and this sword is what he has even if he doesn't want it but he doesn't have a choice in the matter and self-loathing is thick in the back of his throat)

it, but he can use it, and that's what matters most. Has always been what matters most, ever since the day he left home, guitar strapped to his back and songs on his lips and eyes still bright and curious, not jaded and dull as he knows they are now. He could use a sword, then, of course; Philza would never have allowed him to leave without the ability to defend himself. But it did not call to him, and it does not call to him now,

(but there is only one thing that calls to him now)

but there is no longer any room to worry about callings. The dog days are over, and he has been a general, and he has been a president, and he has been a traitor, and he has been a villain, and now, he will settle for being a protector. If just this once.

Dream steps into view.

It has always been odd, the power that he holds to command a room. Part of Wilbur knows that it is more their fault than anything; he can command a room because they give him the power to do so, because even after all this time, they still fear him. But Dream steps into view, and he cannot tear his eyes away, even though Dream is only a skinny man in a hoodie and a smiling mask that a five-year-old could have drawn.

It is something in his bearing, perhaps. The way his head is held high even after weeks of imprisonment. The way he strides forward, confident even though he is far outnumbered. The way his actual mouth, just barely visible under the edge of his mask, curls up in a smirk.

(you look at him and he is wrong he is wrong watch the shadows watch what dogs his steps do you see it you must see it)

Or perhaps it is the blood that stains his hands. It glints in the lava light, tacky, not yet dry.

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting too long," he says. Too calm. Too even.

"Shit off," Tommy says, and Dream's gaze snaps to him.

"Oh, come on now," he says. "Don't be like that, Tommy. After all the fun we had together? I had to work hard to make this little visit happen, you know. I'd think you'd be a little more thankful."

"Okayyy—"

"You've got no right to—"

“Oi, you can’t just—”

“Don’t you fucking talk to him—”

“Yeah, I have to say, that’s pretty cringe of you—”

The chorus of voices that comes to Tommy’s defense, including his own, is gratifying. And it seems to bolster Tommy’s spirits, too, makes him stand just a bit taller, defiance flashing in his eyes. But then, one rises above the rest, and Sapnap takes a few steps forward, holding his own sword steadily out in front of him.

“This is the only warning you’re going to get, Dream,” he states. “Go back to the prison, now.”

Dream laughs.

(a laugh, not a wheeze, and that tea-kettle whistle is a distant memory, belonging to brighter days when no storms brewed on the horizon and all of them were friends and the war was a game, once, before it was real)

“Are you threatening me, Sapnap?” he asks, voice light. “What do you think you’re going to be able to do?”

“You know I am,” Sapnap replies, still steady. “I’m sure you’ll take down a few of us. But not all of us. Not all at once. We united against you before, and we’re going to do it again. You remember what happened last time, right? And I’m not holding back, Dream. I’ve told you. I don’t know who you are anymore. So, last chance. Go back to the prison, now, and we won’t have to do it the hard way. And I won’t have to try and take your final life.”

Dream cocks his head, as if he’s actually considering it.

“You say that as if you think I didn’t know you were all here,” he says. “Like I didn’t know exactly what I was doing. Think I’m going to have to take a hard pass on that one. If you want me back in the prison, you’re going to have to kill me first.”

A flurry of motion. Sapnap swings, and he is no Technoblade but he is no amateur, either, and there is power and speed behind his blow, and Dream just stands there. Unmoving. Puffy shouts. Dream still doesn’t stir, and Wilbur feels like he’s watching in slow motion as the blade approaches Dream’s chest, and it can’t be this easy, he wouldn’t just stand there and take it, not when he’s down to only one life, so what is he—

And then, at the last second: Dream’s hand darts out, lighting fast, grips Sapnap’s wrist, and tugs him forward. Sapnap stumbles, off-balance, crashes against Dream, swing going wide, and before he can recover, Dream isn’t there anymore. It’s like he was never there in the first place; it’s just Sapnap, two steps away from losing his balance completely, though he recovers, looking around wildly.

What—

“The thing is, it was interesting at first,” Dream says, and his voice is coming from somewhere else, is coming from *behind* them, and Wilbur wheels, pushing himself between Tommy and Tubbo and positioning himself in front of both of them, arms outstretched to shield them, perhaps, or to keep them back.

(there is something so very wrong here and if he cannot see what then he will do this much, and if it his life for theirs, so be it)

Dream’s sitting on the Egg. Criss-cross, hands in his lap, swaying side to side slightly. Even the visible parts of his face are cast in shadow, and his mask gleams in the red light.

“Hey, don’t—*Dream*. Get down from there,” Bad says. Like a parent admonishing a child.

“The prison, I mean,” Dream says. “I didn’t see it coming. I was pretty mad about it at first, but I mean, I can adapt to things. So I thought I’d see how it turned out.” He sighs. “But I’m done playing games now.”

“What the shit,” Tommy murmurs, behind him, “what the shit is he talking about, how the fuck did he get up there—”

“It’s been fun,” Dream continues. “A lot of you break the rules a lot, but I can do that, too, so it was fine. It’s been a good game. But you know, there comes a time when even the best games come to an end. You decide to go for checkmate. Or you run out of cards.”

A jolt runs down Wilbur’s spine. He knows, *knows* without any way to know, really, that Dream is looking at him.

(his gaze on you is like stinging hornets is like oil poured over your head and down your throat is like a black hole opening in your chest and the black hole watches and cares nothing for your life it is not in the nature of a black hole to care)

“And I have to say,” Dream says, “you guys are kind of irritating. You and your prisons and your rules and your hypocrisy, all of you. I wanted to unite the server, once, and I guess I did that. It was kind of nice to see, in a way, all of you coming together against me. But it’s all fake, in the end. All of it. You play nice with each other on the surface and turn around and stab each other in the backs. This server’s turned into something awful, and it’s your faults.”

“I am about ninety percent certain that’s not accurate,” Techno says.

“Yeah, what the fuck?” Tommy bites out. “*You’re* the issue here, you bastard. Everything was good until you decided to, to fuck us all over. We’d all be fine and dandy if we’d never met *you*.”

Wilbur opens his mouth to agree and then

(remembers ravines dark and deep and buttons upon buttons upon buttons and Dream gave him the means but he stood in that room and made the decision himself and he cannot assign more blame than exists, cannot say that Dream is the only thing wrong with this server, cannot say that he, too, does not trail devastation in his wake)

shuts it again.

“You can think what you want,” Dream says amiably. “I don’t really care. Like I said, I’m done playing. I just don’t know how you can call me the villain when half the people here have blown up a country.”

“An interesting line from the man with literal blood caking his hands,” Wilbur says. The words come out soft, but they echo like a gunshot. He’s not sure where they came from, but he knows he’s not wrong. He can’t stop staring, can’t stop thinking about it. He’s seen plenty of blood in his life, has been covered in more than his fair share of it, but given the circumstances, there’s only one person that blood can belong to.

He wonders how much it hurt. If Sam was scared.

(he had all three lives as far as he knows, so he’ll be fine, but *fine* is miles from *good*, and Wilbur remembers the first he lost, remembers the pain and the shock and the betrayal and the terror, not just for himself but for the comrades, for the *family* he dragged down with him, dragged into a traitor’s trap, and how must the warden have felt, dying with the knowledge that he failed in his charge?)

“Are you sure I’m the only one?” Dream returns, just as softly, and Wilbur doesn’t know what the fuck he’s trying to get at, except he’s bowled over by a sudden, irrational fear that there *is* blood on his hands, that he’s been dripping with it this whole time and didn’t know it, and there is panic and there is static and the Egg is humming and crooning of blood and decay and the desire to be fed, and he can’t stop himself from looking.

His hands are clean. But they don’t feel it. They itch, like a thousand ants, like a dozen layers of mud caked dry and crackling.

“Leave him be, Dream,” Phil says, overlapping with Tommy’s much louder, “Shut the fuck *up!*”

Wilbur swallows dryly. Downs another sip of holy water. It makes him feel better, though only marginally. There’s not much left in the flask.

“I really think you should get down from the Egg, Dream,” Bad says, slightly more severely than last time. So, a mildly more disappointed parent.

(it occurs to him then: someone should shoot him. he’s unarmored, no weapon in his hand, a sitting duck. someone should shoot him, should take care of the problem right now, while they can, while the opportunity is there, before Dream pulls whatever he’s sure to be planning. so why haven’t they?)

Dream stays silent for a moment.

“I don’t think I will,” he says. “I like it a lot.”

His blood runs cold.

(*no*)

No.

(but you know the feeling of its claws in your mind slimy and prying and seeking and you know the feeling of Dream's gaze on your face suffocating and slick and they are similar so very similar they are two of a kind two of a pair so it makes sense but it doesn't all the same and there is something still that you do not know)

Hello, the Egg croons, hello divine blood corrupted, hello to my brethren, hello to the void that seeps in the cracks, hello to the creature you are now and goodbye to the weakling you were, soft and caring and despicable, and we can do great things together, you and I.

He looks around wildly. No one else seems to hear it. But he's certain it wasn't directed at him.

"So, here's what's going to happen," Dream says. "I'm going to keep sitting up here. And you guys have two choices. You can give in to the Egg. Join it. That'd be fine. If you don't, they're going to kill you, and I'm going to help." He tilts his head upward, and his own smile becomes visible, wide and toothy. "You like those odds better, Sapnap? You think I can take out more than a few of you now?"

For a moment, Wilbur allows himself to hope that Bad won't go along with it. That the desire to see Dream put away will overpower the Egg's directives, whatever they are. But Bad's expression goes from doubtful to considering to determined, and the red of the room deepens, becomes more vibrant, pulses with a steady beat, with a hum that sounds like victory and power and a thousand dissonant voices calling for blood.

The Egg has accepted the offer. Has welcomed Dream into the fold. They will find no ally in Badboyhalo. No ally in Antfrost, Ponk, Punz.

(the fold is the wrong word. Dream is still separate. somehow, inextricably, he knows that this is an alliance of equals, that Dream has surrendered nothing and gained everything)

(do you begin to see on some level you already know)

An arrow slices through the air. Dream jerks to the side. Its barbed head slices open the sleeve of his hoodie, but draws no blood. A second later, and it would have.

"Fuck that," Sapnap says. "And fuck you."

It's as if it's a signal. Phil laughs, no mirth in it, the Angel of Death at the surface. He grips his own sword tighter, and behind him, Tommy and Tubbo are shifting, their breaths coming quicker with the anticipation, with the promise of a fight. Their blood runs hot, and they are still afraid, he knows, but they have allies by their side, and that makes all the difference, and six versus six

(is it six versus six? where is he getting those numbers from? those aren't the numbers from where he's standing)

is terrible odds when Dream is on the opposing side, but they have the Blood God and the Angel of Death and they will all of them fight to the end, and he was too quick, maybe, to give in to despair, to fear.

(but his mind is still screaming that something is *wrong* something is *wrong*)

The Egg's lackeys stand at the ready. Any second, now, any second—

Blood, the Egg sings, there must be blood and I shall drink of their veins, and we shall drink together, you and I, and what is in me is also in you, and you are not of me but you are greater than yourself, and they are all yours for the taking, are ours for the unmaking.

Dream laughs. Not in submission, but in agreement.

And like a lightning flash, Wilbur understands.

“You’re the same,” he says, and just like that, the momentum of the room is arrested, all attention back on him once again. He doesn’t know what’s going to come out of his mouth until he speaks, but the words ring true. He looks at Dream, perched atop the Egg like a demented kind of bird, and understands that something, intrinsically, about them is the same.

Dream grins. Rises to his feet with a jump, balancing easily on the domed surface.

“You’re starting to get it,” Dream says. “I wondered if you would, Wilbur. We come from the same kind of place, all of us. You know what the void is like. You’re not quite like me, but you know what it’s like, to have something whispering in your head.” His grin widens further. Wilbur blinks, once, a sudden irritation in his eyes, and when he looks again, the smile on his mask is wider, too. More crooked. Has it been that way all along?

Another two arrows. One from Sapnap, one from Puffy, now, slightly off target. He dodges both easily.

“I tried to fight at first,” Dream says. “But it turns out it was right all along. I’m greater now than I ever was before.” He pauses, tilting his head, and when he speaks again, it is thick with condescension. “If it’s any consolation, Tubbo, you tried your best. Not your fault you didn’t have a clue what you were doing. Once you let something in, there’s no going back.”

He dares a glance around the room. There’s confusion, irritation, no understanding. He has no idea what Dream’s referencing, knows only that something dreadful is within him, and with that comes the thought that he cannot possibly be human, and that they have never understood the first thing about him this whole time. But Tubbo jolts, goes pale, takes a step back.

“Wait—” he says, “no, what are you—are you saying—but we got rid of it, we got rid of it —”

“Tubbo, what the fuck is he on about now?” Tommy demands, but Tubbo just shakes his head. Rapidly, panicked, and then there is no more time for explanations, because the Egg’s voice rings out in his head once again, a wash of red takes over his vision, and the world tilts,

and it is more than just the Egg, it is the Egg and something else, something deeper rooted, something more toxic, something that permeates the air and the water of this server, something sickly and creeping and dark and powerful, something that says *you are all mine my puppets my own to dispose of and I will have you.*

(you see it now, too late)

By the time he can make sense of things again, he's on his knees, his hands clutching his hair, and there's so much noise, so much noise all around him, and he's lost time, he must have lost time, because everyone's fighting, finally, the strange tension that held the room in sway broken at last. But his head spins, and he can't keep track of where everyone is, the combat nothing but blurs of motion between the red hanging vines.

Dream's still on the Egg. That much he can tell.

(it was a signal a command a directive and you heard it but did not follow you did not follow you will not follow it brought you to your knees but you will not follow)

“—come on Wil, don't do this again, not again, please,” Tommy is saying, and Tubbo is holding him by the shoulder, keeping him upright, and he didn't mean to collapse, hates that he's apparently so susceptible to this, but if there is a silver lining it is in that it has kept his boys by his side, not in that mess, people clashing together with movements that are difficult to track with pounding head and stinging eyes.

He fumbles for the holy water and comes up empty. Nothing left.

“I'm with you,” he manages. “Sorry. Egg was being shouty. Not fun.”

“Oh, well, if it's not *fun*,” Tommy says, visibly relieved, and his attention moves from him to track the battle. It must make more sense to him than it does to Wilbur at the moment, because he frowns. “Stupid fucking Eggers aren't letting anyone get to Dream. Wish we could kill the fuckers. That'd make it easier.”

“Sapnap keeps firing off shots when he can, but he keeps dodging,” Tubbo adds. “It's only been a minute. We were gonna join in, but we didn't want to leave you alone.”

“Okay,” he says. “That's—okay, that's good.” Now that they've said it, he can pick out the combat easier. Bad's fighting Phil and holding his own, Punz and Ponk are keeping Puffy and Sapnap busy, Antfrost is barely fending off Techno, and Dream's overseeing it all from on high, making no moves to join in. They sit in an oasis in the midst of it all, no one seeming to pay them much mind. He'll take the reprieve while he can get it. “Tubbo, what was he talking about?”

“I don't—” Tubbo's face twists. “I don't know how you picked up on it. But months and months ago, Dream was possessed by a demon. A dreamon, we called it. But we got rid of it. Me and Fundy. We exorcised him for sure. And he's not, he's not acting like he did when that was going on, it was so obvious back then, like, his voice was all weird and deep and doubly —”

“Okay, okay, we can figure it out later,” he says. “We can—”

Demons. Dreamons. What the fuck?

(Dream might be possessed but that doesn’t sound right, doesn’t feel right, but it would account for the oil slick gaze and the way the darkness gathers, the shivers down his spine whenever he looks at him, but it’s not quite *right*, but if Dream is a demon and he and the Egg are the same then what does that make the Egg and none of this makes sense at all)

(he misses the days when the worst they had to worry about was Sapnap trying to arrest them for starting a drug van)

As he looks on, Techno shoves Ant in Phil’s direction, and Phil takes on a second opponent easily, the two of them as in sync as they always are. Phil holds all of Ant’s attention, leaving Techno free to pivot toward the Egg, and the man who still stands there. He holds out his sword, points it at him, a threat, an invitation, made easily as breathing, and Wilbur is reminded that Techno has fought Dream before, many times.

“Has prison made you a coward, Dream?” Techno asks, an obvious taunt, and Dream holds himself very still for a moment before laughing, short and sharp. An axe drops into his hand—and when did he find the time to get that?—and he springs forward, rearing back to strike a blow. It’s like

(it is)

watching a clash of gods,

(and how is Dream so strong after so long locked away?)

and the sound of metal on metal rings out as their weapons connect. Techno grins, fierce and wild, and Wilbur doesn’t have to be able to hear them to know what his voices are chanting.

(blood for the blood god)

And then: a realization.

The Egg is unguarded.

Dream is occupied with Techno, now. Bad and Ant are on Phil, Ponk and Punz on Puffy and Sapnap, and the fighting is spread throughout the room, but centered in the middle, where everyone has the most space to move. The Egg is unguarded, and the three of them have been left out, so perhaps they can still do what they set out to do.

His eyes trace the room. If they hug the wall, they can make it to the corner without attracting too much attention, hopefully. They can—

What is Ranboo doing?

He’d forgotten he was here, honestly. He’s been so quiet, so still. He’s hovering by the wall, hands clenching and unclenching, but other than that, he is unmoving, and he doesn’t seem to

be tracking the fight. His eyes stare straight ahead, glazed, and this is something they can't afford. He's not sure why Ranboo came in the first place, but he's a sitting duck where he is right now, and all it will take is one of their enemies seeing the state he's in before he gets used against them.

Alright. They can do this. Alright.

"Open season on the Egg," he murmurs, meeting Tommy's eyes, then Tubbo. He keeps his voice low, inaudible to anyone else. Hopefully. "We creep around the side. Grab your friend along the way." He jerks his head toward Ranboo, and they both understand what he means immediately. He redistributes his weight and stands, and counts it as a win that the wave of dizziness only lasts a moment. He gestures for them to follow him, and starts picking his way through the vines, keeping his movements as soundless as he possibly can. The noises of battle will work in their favor, that way.

Ranboo doesn't react to their approach. Wilbur has seen states sort of like this before, has seen people caught up in flashbacks, dead to the world around them, so perhaps that's what this is. But if that is the case, it's odd that his face is so blank, that there is no expression there at all, that whatever he is seeing, he is barely reacting to it.

"He sleepwalks," Tubbo whispers. "He told me. He might be sleepwalking."

"He—" Okay. Okay, this is fine. "Alright, one of you two grab him. We're not going to leave him here like this."

Tubbo grabs his hand instantly, barely waiting for him to finish speaking. Tommy rolls his eyes. Wilbur glances back and forth between the three of them, then turns his back and presses on, inching his way along the outskirts of the room. No one takes notice of them, no one seems to realize what they're up to, and even the Egg itself doesn't seem to pay much mind; its hum remains constant, a continuous presence that neither wanes nor waxes.

And then, they're crouching behind it. Tubbo tugs on Ranboo's arm, and he sits with them, still absent.

"Alright, big man," Tommy says. "We just gonna stab it to death? I think we should stab it to death."

"It's probably the first thing to try," he concedes. He peers around its thick shell; the fights so far are inconclusive. Techno's taken a scratch to his cheek, Dream a slice along his forearm. He doesn't know how much time they have, and up close, the Egg's shell is thick, hard. Even a netherite sword is going to need some heavy leverage behind it if it's going to pierce through, and being this close to the thing makes his head swim, even when it's not talking directly to him.

"Okay," he says, and places one heel against a vine behind him, bracing himself. The sword feels unwieldy in his hand, awkward and too heavy, but it's not as if the Egg will be hitting back. Strength is what he needs here, not finesse.

He brings his arm back, and then—

Weary son, restless son, it croons, its voice scraping against the insides of his skull, you needn't fight me, wandering son, you only fight yourself and why fight when you can have what you want, that deep sleep, unending peace, the void still calls to you, calls of a world black and unending and eternal, and I can return you there, and you can lay down your steel at last, lay down your iron, lay down your arms at last and only sleep.

He wavers. But—

“Get out of my head,” he grits out, and the other two suddenly look very alarmed. “Shut up, get out, I know your games now, and I’m not falling for them again. Get the fuck *out*.” But though his voice is angry, it is weak, thin, threaded with pain, and his brothers can hear it, and he knows the Egg can feel it, knows the Egg can burrow inside of him and stick itself into all of the unstable places, all of the hollows in his heart, and tease out temptation.

(but he’s made a promise)

He inhales. Prepares himself again.

If not you then it will be him, it says, and he freezes, that darling boy of yours, golden haired sunshine gone limp and dead and eyes dull and blank and rotting in his skull, if it is not you then it will be him, if I cannot have you then I will have him, we will have him, for he does not hear my voice so he must die, and his blood will nourish my roots and I will grow strong on his life, I will kill him if you let me, and will you let me, blood child, child of death, shall you allow me my due?

“Shut up,” he whispers. “Shut up, stop, I won’t—I won’t let that happen. Shut *up*.”

“Wil,” Tommy says, “Wil, here, let me, let me do it, okay?” And Tommy’s hand is on his, gently lowering his sword arm, and then he steps forward, his own blade raised defiantly. “Take this, omelet bitch!”

I will kill him, I will do it now!

“Wait, Tommy, *wait*—”

Tommy drives his sword against the Egg’s shell, and two things happen. The first is that the blade skids off against it, leaving a slight dent, perhaps, but no more than that. And the second is that Tommy goes pale, doubles over, and wraps his free hand around his stomach, wheezing, eyes bugging out of his skull.

“Holy shit,” he gasps, “*holy* shit, that hurt, what the hell—”

“Tommy?” Tubbo demands. “Tommy, what is it, what did it do?”

“It hurt me,” Tommy says, like he can’t quite believe it. He straightens, some of the color slowly returning to his face. “The bastard hurt me. It was like, like fucking fire in my chest or some shit, what the hell?”

“It said it was going to kill you,” Wilbur whispers. “That’s what it said to me.”

“Oh.” Tommy stares at him. “Well, um, it didn’t. Obviously. Still kicking.”

“But it will,” he says. “That’s why it didn’t bother to try and stop us coming up here. That’s why none of the Eggers care. That’s why Dream felt alright leaving it alone. If we try to hurt it, it can hurt us back. Physically.”

They stay silent for a moment.

“Well, shit,” Tubbo says. “What are we supposed to do now, then?”

He doesn’t know. He doesn’t *know*. The entire plan revolved around them being able to destroy the Egg. They thought that the people under its control would be the worst problem. And then Dream came along, and that was out the window, but he thought—he thought that he could make sure that this was worth something, that this would bear some fruit, even if they’d have to deal with an even bigger problem afterward. But now, it’s all fallen apart, and the room is still full of the sound of fighting, and what are they fighting for, if they’re not going to be able to accomplish anything without—

I shall spare him if you give in, if you let yourself go, I shall give you peace and keep it from him, my ally wants him alive and I can make concessions, I can be generous, so I put it on your shoulders and the choice is yours, child of—

“Shut *up*,” he screams, hoarse and jagged, and the red in his vision now is anger, pure and undiluted, and the sudden surge of strength does not feel like his own, and the movement he makes does not feel like his own, because it is impulsive and ill-conceived, but he drives his own weapon into the Egg’s bulk, and understands only moments later what Tommy was talking about, because all the breath leaves his lungs at once, and his chest is set aflame, like there is fire

(fire all around him, fire, fire, fire, beautiful and fitting, fitting that it should end this way, in this utter annihilation of one of his greatest creating, a torch taken to his legacy, and he set down the pitch himself)

racing across his skin and in his heart, in his *heart*, and his heartbeat stutters, and then just as quickly as the sensation began, it ends, and he is left winded, exhausted, unsteady.

“Oh my god—”

“You stupid asshole, why would you—”

“Sorry,” he manages. “Sorry, it just, it pissed me off. You hear that?” He turns toward it.

“You’re pissing me off, you great breakfast food. You are a terrible buffoon, and I hate you.”

You cannot hold out forever, void child.

He winces, bringing a hand up to his forehead. But he glares.

“We’ll see about that,” he states.

And then it all goes to shit. Even more than it's gone to shit already. Because Dream is still fighting with Techno, and Wilbur hasn't been paying attention to them for the past few minutes, but they both still seem to be going strong, and his attention is brought back to them by Dream calling out—

“I think I'll call in that favor, Technoblade!”

And Tommy says—

“Oh, fuck no.”

And Tubbo swears, soft and vehement, and Wilbur is confused, because since when does Techno owe Dream a favor? How would he allow himself to be indebted to the man in the first place?

(another remembrance: following the flash of gold, following the fighting that he paid no attention to at all, because he had Friend and how exciting it was, to have a blue sheep, a blue sheep who he loved very much, who he could show everyone and perhaps make them happier because who wouldn't love Friend immediately upon seeing them, but on the edge of the square there is a figure cloaked in green)

“Oh yeah?” Techno asks. He sounds unconcerned, but that's just Technoblade. He takes a step back, disengaging from their fight, and Dream does the same, twirling his axe in his hand. “I'd be careful with that. You never know when I might inexplicably go deaf.”

“You can't avoid it when I'm right in front of you,” Dream says.

“You're underestimating my powers of—”

“Listen to the Egg, Technoblade,” Dream says. “That's the favor. Just stand there for a minute and listen to it. Let it really get to you. Let it sink in. You like blood, right? The Egg likes blood, too.” He shrugs, infuriatingly casual. “A bit messy for my taste, but whatever works, right? I don't mind getting my hands a little dirty if I have to. We're the same, in that way, you know.”

“Oh, fuck no,” Tommy says again, and then he's starting forward, and Wilbur barely catches him by the shoulder in time. He doesn't want him near Dream. He doesn't want either of them near Dream. And Dream has to have something up his sleeve, with the way he's brought this up so suddenly.

(the air feels electric, feels like something is awaited, feels like something is building, building to a breaking point, and he doesn't want to know what is about to shatter)

“Wait,” he hisses, and Tommy glares, but he ignores him, taking in the battlefield again. Nothing has changed since last he checked, since before they hunkered down in this corner, by the Egg, and that is what is wrong here. It's all too neat. Sapnap and Puffy have their fight, nicely contained, and Phil has his, and Techno his, and no one has dealt any serious damage against anyone else, and he knows that their side is constrained by not wanting to seriously

injure anyone who is currently being mind controlled, but what is holding back the other side?

It is all too neat in a way that battles never are, because the first rule of combat is to keep your head, the second is not to drop your weapon, and the third is that no plan survives contact with the enemy. And yet, here they are, all opponents evenly matched, no side winning, and where is the chaos, the bloodshed?

If there is no chaos yet, it is because it has yet to be unleashed.

“I mean, I hear it,” Techno says, and has it been a minute? Surely not. Tommy and Tubbo have both gone tense. Ranboo is still crouching, right where Tubbo put him. He doesn’t know if that’s typical behavior of sleepwalkers. He doesn’t have time to think about it right now. Because Dream told Techno to listen to the Egg, and it’s a favor, and Techno always honors favors, no matter what, so he’s doing it, he’s listening to it, and somehow, that’s not what he’s most worried about,

(because there is something holding its breath, a leashed tension, a match held loosely, about to drop, and it’s been growing all this time but he senses it only now, only here, only watching his brother face down a nightmare forty paces away, and he thinks he hears the Egg in his mind and he thinks it sounds smug)

“But I hear a lot of voices,” Techno finishes. “Can’t say I find this one very compelling.”

(it should be a relief, a relief, a relief to know that the Egg will not take its red and shove it into Techno’s mind, that he will not look into his eyes and find a monster in his place, but his heart races and something is building, building, building, and there is no way that Dream staked everything on this play, on bringing Techno to his side, so what is the plan here, what is his plan?)

“I wondered if you might say something like that,” Dream says. He doesn’t sound at all like someone whose plans have just been foiled, who has just wasted a favor from the strongest fighter on the server. “I had to try, you understand.”

“Of course,” Technoblade says.

(there is a dam and the dam)

He feels it, then, and he thinks everyone else does too, and Tommy and Tubbo press against him, hands gripping each other for balance as the *two of a kind united now and I lend my power to you and together you will succumb or you will perish and I no longer care for which you have spurned me for the last time locked me away and stripped me of the power that is mine and I reclaim it now and our power united united now my strength to yours revenge is sweetest when it is hot and the blood is fresh.*

(bursts)

The vines.

The vines on the ground twitch. The vines hanging down sway. He moves his foot as the vine nearest to him spasms like a dying animal.

“What the fuck,” Tommy whispers.

A shout crawls up his throat. It dies on his lips.

It happens too quickly to process.

One moment, Techno is standing there, and the next, there is a red vine around his neck, and the crack should not echo through the room as it does, but it is all Wilbur can hear. All Wilbur can see. One of Techno’s hands comes up, and then it falls limp. His body goes slack, held up by the vine and the vine only, the vine still encircling his neck, the vine that digs into the skin under his helmet, the vine that—

That can’t—

That can’t be—

Technoblade never—

He doesn’t—

And then, before he has time to understand at all, before his mind can shake off the numbness that’s taken him, the complete and utter lack of comprehension, the ringing in his ears that is, oddly, interspersed with an enderman’s distressed warble, before he can come out of it—the world explodes in a brilliant flare of light, golden and pure, a rush of energy that sings of the universe, that sings of life and renewal and second chances, a soul tethered, kept back, returned, re-tuned, and for a split second, he is floating in the void again as the fabric of reality shifts, as the light dances, as the rules are rewritten, and he can see everything, and he is one with the universe and the universe is with him and there are hundreds of thousands of voices chanting—

“Technoblade never dies!” Techno crows, and the golden light of the totem flickers and dances in his eyes, visible even from here, and Techno is sure to *feel* that later, when his adrenaline comes crashing down. But for now, the laugh that springs from Wilbur’s lips is giddy and relieved and joyful all at once, and the grief that barely had a chance to gather at all dissipates like smoke in the wind.

“How many of those things do you have?” Tubbo yells, right in his ear, and then Phil laughs too, and he brings his sword hilt down on Bad’s, and Bad’s own weapon skitters across the floor and Phil wheels on Ant in the next motion, and Ponk and Punz are being pushed back, and Techno swirls his sword again and leaps for Dream, and suddenly it’s like the tide is turning, like maybe they can win the day and they’ll have time to work out the rest, except then Tubbo shouts again, a warning this time, but there is no time to move before a vine rips the others from him and he is slammed against the surface of the Egg, hard, and—

He can—

He—

(it's on him it's on him get it off get it off off off off off off off)

(it's trying to consume him trying to take in all that he is and spit out nothing not even the bones and if he lets it there will be nothing left of him if he lets it and he fights he struggles and it's on him and trying to cover him and blood is dripping over him and he can't breathe he can't breathe he opens his mouth and the blood pours in and he thrashes but its grip is inescapable and he's panicking and he can't he can't he doesn't want no rest is worth this)

And then hands are on him, pulling him forward, two pairs, and he opens his eyes, not realizing he'd closed them, and he lets himself be tugged away, his lungs inflating, and he expects to see Tommy and Tubbo, but it is Tommy and *Ranboo*, and Tubbo is hacking away at the vines that attacked him, that slammed him against the thing that tried to—

“Wilbur!” Tommy is shouting in his face. “Wilbur, don't be an Egghead, don't, don't let it fucking eat you, you—”

“It wasn't my *idea*,” he gasps out.

“Oh, good, you're okay,” Ranboo says, perhaps a little hysterically, but there's no time to calm him down, no time to puzzle over why he's suddenly awake. “I've got no idea what's going on. Why's Dream out?” His voice is about an octave higher than Wilbur remembers it being, but at least he's functional.

“We don't know,” he says. “We're dealing with it. Well. Dealing with it. Sort of. Everything's gone a bit shit. Did you know you weren't awake?”

“I mean, it happens,” Ranboo says. “I never know at the time. That's not, um, that's not how it works? I'm sorry?”

“No time, boys,” Tommy says. “We have, we have so many problems right now.”

The vines writhe, twist, lash out, and it is not all of them, not nearly all of them, because if it were all of them, they would be shredded like mincemeat, but it is more than enough to be a major issue, because suddenly, everyone has to focus on their foes and foliage all at once, and Techno and Phil seem alright, but Puffy and Sapnap begin to struggle under the onslaught, and they're not going to win this. These vines attack with purpose, with blood lust, and they are seeking their deaths and they need to go. They need to cut their losses, as much as it stings, before someone who doesn't have a totem loses a life.

(it burns the general in you to retreat now because there is always some part of you that will think in terms of tactical sacrifices and acceptable losses but there is also a part of you that can see when a battle is beyond its turning point and this battle is far past that and it was not in your favor so it is time to sound the horn time to perform an about-face and try not to be burned too badly in the leaving)

“We need to go!” Puffy calls, as if she's read his mind. “We need to go right now!” She and Sapnap start to back slowly toward the entrance, covering each other as best they can with

Ponk and Punz and fucking *plants* all after them.

“Wait, what? We can’t just—” Tommy starts, but he shakes his head, cutting him off.

“She’s right,” he says. “We stay here, and someone’s going to die. For real. And I’m not going to let that be you or Tubbo.” Tommy’s expression sets into something mulish, but he continues. “We’re not fighting anyone, we just have to make it to the exit. We all cover each other’s backs, and keep an eye out for the viney shit. Nobody’s losing a life to plants today.”

He doesn’t intend to use the old general’s voice, but Tommy and Tubbo both straighten, soldiers called to their posts, and he knows he can trust them in this, at least. They have their orders.

What could possibly go wrong?

(you can still feel him, can feel it, can feel both of them, but you can feel his presence grating up against yours, everything dark and corrupted and poisonous, you can feel it in the vines and in the air like sandpaper against your skin and he is not done yet do not turn away he is not done yet)

He doesn’t even get to take a step. Dream ducks under a blow from Techno and then looks to *him*, and even from across the room, he can feel his gaze pinning him, piercing him, and

(something is about to happen)

there is a flash of movement, too quick, too sudden,

(but you cannot fight the void, the absence of him, the howling pit that is he and that is it and that is them together)

and Tommy yelps, and then he’s gone, right out from under his hands, being dragged across the room, toward Techno, toward Dream, and time slows down. He lurches forward, hand outstretched, but he’s too slow, too *slow*, and he is still reaching out, is still stumbling forward, as if that will do anything, as if he will be able to cross forty paces before that vine, thick and red, deposits Tommy at Dream’s feet, and he is useless, powerless, and Tubbo is beside him, shouting, charging forward with more strength than he has in his own weary muscles, more power, but he will not be enough either.

Techno’s eyes widen. He tries to step forward, tries to hack away at the vine that has Tommy in its grip, but Dream leaps forward with another onslaught, so Techno is forced to focus on that and not his little brother, their little brother, now staggering to stay upright, now *too close to Dream*.

He keeps pushing forward, and his legs strain like he’s moving through molasses. Vines lash out at him, tearing at his clothes, his hair, his skin, and he can feel blood, warm and sticky, trailing down his leg, though there is no pain. Tubbo is beside him still, and Ranboo on his other side, and their swords sing but more and more vines move, now, and there are too many, too many to fight, and the room is filled with a red haze, and they’re closer now, but they’re not going to make it before Dream does something—

Dream launches himself into the air, flips over Techno's head. He's going for Tommy.

He's going for Tommy.

(you promised to protect him you promised you promised and now death stares him in the face and you are now fifteen feet away fifteen feet and closing but fifteen feet too distant fifteen feet too late you cannot watch your brother die but that is the role you are consigned to spectator useless and reaching out for a hand that will never hold yours again)

Then, Techno is there. Techno pushes Tommy to the side, hard enough to fall to the floor. But he has no time to move out of the way himself, no time to bring his blade up to parry, and Dream's axe sinks deep into his exposed throat, and Dream smiles, and Wilbur knows that this was his plan all along.

All the world goes still.

A crow caws, low and mournful.

He thinks he is screaming, but there is no sound in his ears.

Dream pivots lightly. Yanks the axe out. Blood spurts. Tommy's mouth falls open, a rictus of horror. Technoblade's jaw works, and his hands clench, unclench. He says something, and Wilbur can't hear it.

(he has another totem he'll be fine he'll be fine please let him pull out another totem because Technoblade never dies Technoblade never dies please he never dies don't let him die)

His inventory spills across the floor, and dust dissipates on the air.

Sound rushes back. As one, all of the communicators in the room chime. Just like that, Techno is gone.

"How many people are gonna have to sacrifice themselves for you before you learn?" Dream asks Tommy, axe dripping blood on the ground, and vines crowd him, vines weave around him, absorbing the blood, lapping up the blood, *Techno's* blood.

(but Technoblade never dies Technoblade never dies Technoblade never dies)

Time resumes its normal pace.

He reaches Tommy's side in the next instant. Dream just stands there, observing them, and the smile on his face is the cruelest on he has ever seen on a person, on a human,

(and that includes the times he's looked in a mirror, seen dark bags and a sallow face and lips twisted into something too dark to be a smile)

but Dream isn't human, is he? Can't be. And Wilbur doesn't know what he is, doesn't know if he's a demon himself or if he's possessed or what, but he takes a split second to look Tommy over for injuries, finds none, and then joins Tubbo in starting for Dream, blade in his

hand, even though he has no chance, they have no chance, not even together, because Dream had to resort to dirty tactics to defeat

(but Technoblade never dies so why why is he how can this)

Techno, but even he and Tubbo together do not a blood god make.

Dream holds out his axe. Saying, *come get me, then.*

And his heart is in his throat because his brother, his brother

(his brother is dead his brother is dead his brother has two lives left but his brother is dead)

was right there two seconds ago and now he has not, and a large part of him

(all of him, since childhood, since the first time Techno went out and came back bloodied and grinning and carrying an inventory full of loot)

has always assumed that Technoblade was invincible, that there is nothing in heaven or hell that could stop him, and that was why he let him into Pogtopia in those early days, because the world was shrinking in around him and there was no one he could trust but Technoblade was the strongest there was and he needed the strongest, needed the power of the blade, the power of iron and steel to take back what was his.

(and part of you looked in his eyes met crimson with your brown and knew deep within yourself that your brother was here for you here for you both and maybe you could let your guard down just a little let yourself be protected let yourself trust and you did, if only for a moment, even if it didn't last, didn't save you or anyone else in the end)

They cannot defeat Dream. He, especially, cannot defeat Dream. Not through combat. But Ranboo crouches by Tommy, and he steps up beside Tubbo, and raises his sword.

Phil gets there first.

His blade knocks into Dream's axe so hard that he almost loses his grip, and Phil doesn't let up, aiming another strike against his head and another against his chest and another against his arm, and it is all that Dream can do to block the blows, and this, *this* is the Angel of Death, and there is fear on Dream's face, and then he is gone, standing atop the Egg again, and Phil almost follows after him.

But then, a mass of vines raises up, all around them. Too many to fight off, even together. Wilbur braces himself, and then there is something around them, covering them, shielding them, something massive and black, and Phil grunts, and—

(and how many times has he protected you like this now)

And his wings—

Thorns sink into Phil's wings, which are out on full display, and Wilbur can't stop staring, because Phil's wings are tattered and torn, and his feathers are sticking out every which way,

clearly not cared for, but that isn't even the worst part, because there are *holes* in them, holes in his wings where Wilbur can see straight through to the opposite wall, and there are featherless patches covered in scarred skin, and there are places where bone lies exposed to the air, sticking out from flesh and plumage, and he can't fly on these. There's no way that he can fly on these.

(explosions around him and the heat scorches his back and he smiles and laughs and then Phil is there wrapping his wings around him and Phil cries out in pain as the walls go down as the fire licks at both of them scorches both of them but he didn't think to care then and oh gods what has he done what has he done)

(and Phil's wings are bleeding now as the red thorns dig in and it's happening again happening again before his eyes and how many times will people have to sacrifice themselves for him before he learns?)

(your father's bones blackened and twisted by heat and do they hurt do they hurt bones are not meant for the open air and surely the scar tissue aches and they are ruined they are ruined his pride and joy ruined and your father will not fly again will not feel the wind at his back and he loved it he loved it and he gave it up for you and yet you are here again still asking for a sacrifice always asking for a sacrifice at least once more)

He's panicking. He's panicking, and he needs to stop panicking, because there panic has no place on a field of battle, and that is a lesson he learned long ago, at the knee of his country, his beautiful country, and for a moment, he is on the walls, orange and black, and he is fighting for his nation, fighting for his people, and then he blinks, and Phil has gathered Tommy in his arms. Tommy doesn't protest, blank shock painting his face.

"We need to go, Wil," Phil says. "I need you all to guard me while I get Tommy out." His voice is steel. No room for argument.

He nods, numbly. Moves mechanically. Doesn't pay heed to the way the vines slash at him, as long as they're not slashing at Tommy. There is blood on him.

(but it is his own, so that is alright)

He blinks, and Puffy and Sapnap have joined them. Sapnap's white shirt is stained red. Blood sheets down from a wound on Puffy's forehead. But they are alive.

(Techno isn't)

(Technoblade never dies but Technoblade died and what do you do when the immortal figures of your childhood are no longer so?)

Bad and the rest do not stop them. The Egg does not stop them, though he can feel it, still, humming a victory march in his mind.

Dream, from where he stands on its top, does not stop them. He chances one glance back; Dream offers a mock salute.

(they are letting them go, they are letting them go as the cat releases the mouse, sure of its ability to follow the limping blood trail, sure of its chances of having a meal later, when it is more hungry, when it will be all the more satisfying. they are letting them go, and it is no mercy, and they will be driven forward like vermin, but they have no choice but to go, no choice but to run)

And then they're going up the stairs, up the ladder, and into the sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

The good news: Wilbur's getting a bit better at resisting the Egg.

The bad news: literally everything else.

There are quite a few things in this fic that I decide on as I go. The idea of taking one of Techno's lives, for instance, came to me in mid-March. But the Dream thing has been planned from the very beginning. I am far from a c!Dream apologist, the guy is terrible and I love his character but like... as a villain, y'know? Because he's really good at being, just, the worst. But I think the concept of dreamons is a fun one to play with in fanworks, and I've read a lot of great possession fics. That kind of angst is right up my alley, so I've been excited to get to this part. What exactly is going on with him will be further clarified in future chapters, but for now, I'll just say that he's not... *exactly* possessed? But he's also not *not* possessed. I'm looking forward to where I'm taking this one. :)

Again, thank you so much for the response to this fic! I'm currently a bit snowed under by schoolwork, so I can't promise that I'll be responding to comments in the near future, but each one I get absolutely makes my day. And if you have a question for me, or just want to hang out, I'm pretty active on [tumblr](#) whenever I can be!

It'll probably be another two weeks until the next chapter instead of just one like usual, so look for the next one on April 30th. And if you'd like to read something else in the meantime, I accidentally tripped and started a [time travel au](#). It's Tommy-centric, but with plenty of angst to go around. Updates are gonna be pretty slow for a while, since it's going to be a side project until this fic gets finished, but the first chapter is up if you think you'd be interested!

Next up, Chapter Twelve: In which the emotional fallout is intense, and the need to regroup in a relatively fortified place leads them to someone that Wilbur has very, very mixed feelings about. But beggars can't be choosers in the king's own castle.

nowhere to run

Chapter Notes

HOW ARE WE DOING TODAY Y'ALL???

Y'all. *Y'all*. I am living. My crops? Watered. My skin? Clear. Words simply cannot describe what I am feeling. Obviously canon!revivebur is gonna be very different from the direction I took in this fic, but I am just. So very excited. I can't wait to see where this goes.

Anyway, I've got a relatively tame chapter for you today! I think we've earned it, after this last week. And also, as a note, I wanted to say that I know that in canon, Sapnap was involved with some of the dreamon hunting stuff. For the sake of this fic, we're ignoring that. :D

Chapter content warnings for swearing, blood, injury, aftermath of (temporary) character death, mild disassociation, slight suicidal ideation, and references to past abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun is too bright in his eyes. Too bright, and wrong, somehow, that it should be shining like this. Should still be shining, after the loss they've just suffered, after watching his brother crumple to dust in front of him. But the sun hardly cares for things like that, so they all stumble out of the hole in the ground that serves as the entrance to the spider spawner and beyond, and the daylight surrounds them, unforgiving.

"Where do we go, what do we do," Tubbo is chanting, and Ranboo is muttering under his breath, a continuous litany of, "I can't believe he's gone, I can't believe that happened—" His own lips feel glued shut, his throat devoid of sound. His skin buzzes.

(the two images interpose: Techno hanging from the vine, head at an unnatural angle, Techno wavering on his feet, blood pouring from his throat, and there is a flash of light and there is ash all at once, as if the first caused the second, as if instead of healing him, shoving his soul back into a body clinging to life, the totem burned him up from the inside out, and unlike the phoenix there was no rebirth)

"We can't stay here," Puffy says. Her eyes are wide, and her hands are shaking, but her voice has the same determined cant to it as it always does. "We need somewhere to hole up."

"And where is that supposed to be?" Sapnap demands. His breathing is unsteady. "Where the fuck are we supposed to go after that? Where isn't the thing gonna be able to reach? With, with Dream being, being, what even *was* that? Why was he—how was he—?" He breaks off, sparks crackling at his fingertips, and his face is a mask of distress, of questions

(was he always like that and did I not see or did something happen to him did something make him like that is that my friend or is there something inside of him something behind his eyes that is not him at all and if that is the case how did I not notice how did I not notice how did I not save him)

that Wilbur feels he recognizes. Or would, if he let himself. If he let himself care.

His eyes drift over to Phil. Phil, who stands silently, blood dripping from his wings, a thousand old injuries reopened by thrashing thorns. Who stands with Tommy in his arms, Tommy, who is curled up as tightly as he can reasonably manage, his face tucked into Phil's shirt. Trembling. Quiet.

(he will die and I will kill him, the Egg says, and I have already begun, and you cannot protect him, you do not have the strength, except by what I can grant you)

"Church Prime," Puffy says. "It's the only place that might be safe."

"Who's to say it would be?" Sappnap snaps. "You saw it in there! The vines have never moved like that before, and Prime knows what else it can do now. And maybe the Egg wouldn't be able to get in, but who's to say that would stop—" He cuts off again, face contorting.

His leg is beginning to hurt, now. All of him is, actually, now that his adrenaline is wearing thin, now that the horror is sinking in, but it's concentrated in his leg in particular, and he looks down to see that his left pant leg is all but shredded, blood dripping down in steady streams and splattering on the grass by his feet. The vines got him worse than he thought, then, and he bites his lip against the sting.

He's had worse, though. He's had so much worse. This is practically nothing, and Puffy and Sappnap are still arguing, and Tubbo and Ranboo are huddled together, eyeing the vines around them with deep suspicion, unmoving as they are just yet, and Phil is silent, and he's going to stay silent, because Wilbur recognizes all too well the strain in his eyes, the way he's holding onto Tommy with a death grip.

(he's watched two of his sons die, now, and Techno will be back, will still have two lives left, but that does not heal the hurt, does not assuage the pain of seeing your brother, your son, your family die in front of your eyes before you can lift a finger to stop it, and Phil's eyes shine with a grief almost beyond what Wilbur can understand. except he understands all too well, in the end)

He's had worse, and someone needs to step up.

(the old mantle settles across his shoulders, and if he closes his eyes it's like nothing's changed at all, and the sun sets on the city he is determined to give everything for, still standing, walls still strong)

"Boxed in like a fish," he croaks, and Puffy and Sappnap turn to him as one. "That's what we'll be, if we go to Church Prime. Whether it protects us in the moment or not won't matter once we run out of supplies. We need somewhere better situated. Somewhere we can defend, that might withstand a siege, if it comes to it."

Puffy makes a frustrated gesture. “I’m open to suggestions,” she says. “The prison, maybe, if we have to? We could probably keep people out as easily as—ah, shit, Sam.” She pulls her communicator out and taps out a quick message, and then frowns. “It’s telling me it can’t go through. Why isn’t it going through? Sam had all three lives, he should be—”

“Admins can read private messages,” Phil murmurs. “Wouldn’t surprise me if Dream could fuck with the whole system, whatever the fuck he is.”

Wilbur reads between the lines. Techno, for the moment, is unreachable. He processes the information and moves on, refusing to let it get to him, refusing to let himself be overpowered by

(Techno’s unreachable Techno’s unreachable Techno’s respawned and he’s on his own and they can’t talk to him can’t get to him quickly and what if something went wrong what if something happened)

emotions.

“Sam will make his way to us,” he says. “I’m vetoing the prison. Like hell are we staying in there. Other thoughts?”

“What gives you vetoing power?” Sapnap asks.

“Somebody needs to make a decision,” he says, and it is with strength he doesn’t feel, confidence he is only pretending at, a force of command that comes from some unknown place, since he feels as though he is miles away from himself, “and I don’t see you coming up with anything. Either help or stop complaining.”

Sapnap’s face reddens, and he opens his mouth, to argue, no doubt, but then Ranboo breaks in with, “Foolish, maybe?” and hunches his shoulders when attention turns to him. “Sorry, it’s just, I’m pretty sure Foolish isn’t, um, a big fan of the Egg or anything, so maybe he could help?”

Wilbur has no idea who the fuck Foolish is.

“Nah, he’s too far out,” Tubbo says. “It’ll take ages to get to his place. And we need somewhere close, but not too close, so we still have a good place to fight back from, right, Wilbur? If we leave now, the Egg’ll just take over the whole SMP with nothing to stop it.”

“My thoughts exactly, Tubbo,” he says, and again, it is just like the old days, and they are standing atop the L’Manberg walls, and Tubbo has just said something particularly clever, and warmth and pride curl in him before he remembers where they are, what they’re doing. They need to decide, and soon. They’re just hanging around near the entrance, and sooner or later, someone’s going to come after them, whether they let them go at first or not. “Is there anyone else who has a good position, location-wise and resource-wise?”

“Wait,” Puffy says. “Eret’s castle.”

“Eret’s castle doesn’t have doors,” Sapnap says.

“No, but I stopped by earlier to see if they wanted to join us,” Puffy says. “They weren’t there, but the grounds were completely free of vines. And sure, there aren’t any doors, but between all of us, I’m sure we could make some. Eret’s got plenty of supplies, last I checked.”

Eret. The name evokes a wealth of associations, most of them unpleasant. His first instinct is to reject this idea like the last, to avoid placing their lives in the hands of one who has already betrayed him, who led them all into a death trap, who almost ended their revolution in one fell swoop. But Puffy has a point. Eret’s castle ticks all the right boxes: it’s defensible, well-supplied, and if there are no vines to clear, all the better. They’ll have to build doors, but between the lot of them, that’s easily manageable.

(a wealth of associations and many unpleasant but there is Eret offering them supplies offering their fragile rebellion help and they tried so dearly to redeem themselves and he could not have seen that then wrapped in his own shadows as he was but perhaps he can see it now perhaps he can better appreciate it, give a little more benefit of the doubt, and if he is given a second chance after everything after committing the worst crime of all then who is he to deny them absolution?)

(another memory, more blurry: he is scared but stalwart as they go through the motions, and he does not want to die, is terrified of that endless void, but he knows that the server needs a leader and his living self must be that leader, and Eret is here, and Eret agrees, and Eret acts out their part, and Eret is trying so hard, and he cannot see their eyes behind their glasses but he imagines that if he could, he would see a fool’s hope in them)

“Eret, then,” he says. “We go to Eret.”

And no one disagrees. It’s strange. They have no reason to listen to him, really. They have far more reasons *not* to listen to him, more reasons to think that following his lead will end in disaster than otherwise. But Puffy nods, and Sapnap backs down, and Tubbo and Ranboo both look to him for direction like it’s the war and he’s in charge of child soldiers once again. Phil looks to him, too, but his expression is inscrutable, and only a slight tightness around his eyes shows that he’s in any pain at all.

So they go to Eret. Staggering through the grass, tripping over vines that still don’t move, thank Prime, and then along the Prime Path, and his leg hurts worse with every step, pain jolting up into his hip, it seems, and it’s not long before he’s walking with a limp. But they’re all hurt in some way, so he hides it as best he can. He can deal with it when they’re safely behind stone walls.

And then, Tommy says, “Put me down, I can walk.”

Wilbur glances over. Tommy’s face is still buried in Phil’s shirt.

“You sure, mate?” Phil asks softly.

“Yes, I’m fucking sure,” Tommy snaps, louder now, turning his face outward, pushing against Phil’s chest. His cheeks are flushed, his breaths coming short and fast, and he’s trying to pass it off as anger, and maybe part of it is. But Wilbur knows him better than to think that that’s

all. Knows him better than to think that he would have let Phil carry him in the first place if he was alright.

“Okay, then,” Phil says, and swings Tommy down. Tommy wavers for a step, but slaps away Phil’s hand when he extends it, muttering a sharp, “Fuck off.”

And then they keep going. Tommy doesn’t say anything else. Wilbur keeps glancing at him, but he’s refusing to meet anyone’s gaze, even Tubbo’s. And—that’s another thing that’s going to have to wait. He wants nothing more than to stop now and make sure that Tommy’s going to be okay, but they don’t have time, and the general in him will not call for a halt until the retreat is over, until he is sure the enemy is not biting at their heels.

(retreating from Dream once again, and it is familiar and not, the same and not, and history runs in a circle, echoes and rhymes)

Eret’s courtyard is indeed free of vines, just as Puffy promised. Wilbur half-expects them to be nowhere in sight, based on what Puffy said, but they are standing right there, next to a skeletal horse they’re frantically saddling, and they’re checking their communicator every now and again, with the jerky motions of someone who doesn’t particularly want to but can’t make themselves stop.

Then, suddenly, they look up at the sky. Wilbur follows their gaze to the flock of crows wheeling overhead, a dark mass of beating wings, each bird barely distinguishable from the others. All of them completely, eerily silent.

Eret stands there a moment. Just staring. Wilbur can’t tell what the look on their face is, but their shoulders are tense. And then, they look back down, and realize that the lot of them are there, stumbling in under the gate, and they visibly startle.

“Hey, Eret,” Puffy says, before they can get a word in. “Can we crash? And build some gates?”

“What,” Eret says. “What is—Puffy, *what* is going on? How did Dream manage to kill Sam *and* Technoblade? Is he—” They run a hand through their hair, and then start striding forward, their cape flaring out behind them. They haven’t said anything about him yet, haven’t reacted to his presence. “He’s out, isn’t he? I was going to come and see, but he’s out?”

“He’s out,” Puffy agrees. “We were kind of hoping you’d help us out on this one.”

“Of course,” they say quickly. “Of course, anything you—anything you need.” They’re rattled, clearly, more than Wilbur has ever seen them, perhaps. “I just—how did this happen? I thought the prison was secure, I thought—are you all *okay*?”

“Aside from the obvious?” Puffy says. “Yeah, we’re great. You haven’t been around much lately, I don’t know how much you know about the Egg and all of that, but that’s an issue too, along with Dream. And some other stuff that I’ve got no idea about, that we really just kind of need to all sit down and talk about.”

“The Egg? I’ve—I’ve heard of it, I think. I’ve been elsewhere for a while.” Their lips twist into a smile that isn’t quite a smile. “Doing a bit of soul-searching, you might say. Found more questions than answers, unfortunately. Alright. I can get you all whatever you need, you can absolutely stay here if that’s what you’d like, but what was that about gates?”

Right. This is taking too long.

Wilbur still feels a bit outside of his body as he steps forward, but that’s alright. He’s limping, but the pain is distant, and he can let his brain work on autopilot, let his mouth move on its own without regarding the consequences, without thinking too much about

(this is Eret and you know them and they betrayed you and you hurt them and now you’re back and here is a test here is a true test it shouldn’t matter how they react to you you shouldn’t care for their opinion but you do you know you do though you pretend you don’t pretend they’re nothing but a traitor to you but you are a traitor to yourself and you know that between the two of you you are the worse and here you both are and you only need one more and everyone will be back together again like the old days like the old days those good old days)

what happens next.

“Right, then,” he says, straightening his spine and stepping up to be visible just behind Puffy, to the side and a few feet back. Eret’s head whips toward him. “To summarize: the Egg is bad, Dream is also bad, they’re now working together, also with Bad, Techno is gone, we’re all in rough shape, a mind-controlling potentially demonic entity is likely to try to take over the server, and also, I’m here, despite my best efforts. Does that paint enough of a picture for you, or should I elaborate further?”

Eret stares at him. He stares back, doesn’t let himself fidget. He’s putting the general on display, and it has never felt more like a disguise, like yet another mask,

(and didn’t he tell Tommy he wasn’t going to do this anymore?)

but a familiar one, one that’s almost comfortable. He can force himself into the general’s shoes and worry about tactics and battles and numbers and strategy, and tuck the rest of himself away for when there’s time for it. Can think of this as just another alliance to be made, a debriefing to be held rather than

(Eret traitor friend ally enemy the place in your heart is curdled and sour and you do not know if you are capable of starting anew)

and his losses are statistics and cold facts rather than

(Techno’s eyes golden and glittering and then they go dim and pale red pale and staring the light in your brother’s eyes gone out and it is not the first time you have watched a brother die in front of you but Technoblade never dies is never supposed to die never to go to dust never and you cannot make sense of it cannot make sense of the world turned on its head)

“Wilbur?” Eret asks, after a very long moment, and he doesn’t understand why their voice breaks in the way that it does. “You’re—it’s you? Not Ghostbur?”

He spreads his arms, lifting an eyebrow.

“Do I look like Ghostbur to you?” he asks.

“No,” Eret answers right away. “No, that you do not. Um, has this been a thing, or...?” They trail off, and Wilbur can’t figure out exactly what their feelings are, but it’s too late to back down, even if he wanted to.

“For a bit,” he says. “Not for too long. Can we move on? We’ve got bigger issues to deal with at the moment.”

He means multiple things, with that. He means, *there’s bigger things to worry about than why I’m here*. He means, *there’s bigger things to worry about than our history, and as so long as we’re on the same side for the moment, it can’t matter right now*. He doesn’t know if Eret catches all of that, but whether they do or not, they nod, seeming to steady themselves.

“Of course,” they say. “I—for the record, it is good to see you, Wilbur.” There is genuine relief in their voice, a tone that says they’re actually glad he’s here, more than glad, even, and he really doesn’t have time to unpack that at the moment. They need a plan, and fast, and they need some goddamn *gates*. And medical attention, probably. The cut on Puffy’s head looks nasty, and Phil’s wings are still dripping blood, and it’s difficult for Wilbur to look at them for too long,

(grief rises up guilt rises up crushing choking your father is grounded and it is your fault)

but it concerns him, how little Phil appears to care for their current state. So there’s that to handle, and it’s almost too much, almost. Almost too much for someone who has spent the majority of the time since he’s been brought back to life cringing away from meeting people, all the confidence he once displayed gone, shrinking, left in the void or in Pogtopia or on the podium from which he announced his own defeat, perhaps. But even still, he remembers how to be the general. He can hide in the general, present the general on the outside, be useful even while he thinks he might be on the verge of collapse, internally. He has been a general, and so he shall be again.

What comes first, then?

He pulls out his comm, scrolling through the messages. There are quite a few in the general chat from just after Sam’s death message, people from all over the server demanding to know what’s going on. His eyes drift over Techno’s, then, and he winces, but keeps reading. There are even more messages after that, capitalization usage increasing dramatically, and his eyes trace over familiar names, a pang in his heart. Niki. Fundy. Quackity. Several from Eret as well. Some from names he doesn’t recognize, like this Foolish person, and someone named Hannah.

But then, they all cut off. There have been none in the past half hour. Since they escaped from the Egg.

Out of curiosity, he taps out a few words: *dream and egg have teamed, regrouping at eret's*. Upon hitting send, the screen goes fuzzy, giving him an error message he's never seen before. So comms truly are down, then, and it's probably just as well; Dream likely knows where they are, but if he doesn't, there's no reason to give him the information.

(and do these old allies old friends deserve to learn of your return from cold words on a screen do you not have the courage to face them yourself face your son your son you have not seen your son)

(the last time he spoke to Fundy, he disowned him. he doesn't know if he still has a son)

(if he does not, he has no one to blame for himself, and perhaps that is why he is too cowardly to check)

"Right, then," he says, looking back up. "Gates are the first priority. They might not do much against whatever the fuck that thing is, but it's better than nothing. Eret, I assume you'd know the best way to go about it?"

Eret's lips quirk into a slight smile, one that is, perhaps, slightly sardonic.

"It is my castle," they agree. "The more hands I have, the quicker it will go, but I can get it done."

"Anyone who's not bleeding profusely, help them with that, then," he says. "Anyone who is bleeding profusely—I assume you've got pots somewhere, Eret?" Eret nods, gesturing toward the inside. "Anyone who is bleeding profusely gets a pot. Once we've got that all covered, we'll reconvene, come up with a plan for where to go from here. Everyone got that?"

He gets a few nods, and no one dissents, so he'll take that as a yes. His gaze travels to the kids then, standing clumped together, and Tommy's eyes are still shadowed, and Tubbo is shifting his weight between his feet, and Ranboo looks lost, awkward, and he wishes he didn't have to ask anything more of them. But that's not how wars work, and this has certainly turned into a war.

(child soldiers once again, and how history echoes)

"Tubbo, Ranboo, I want you on the gates as well," he says, and tries to soften his tone at least a little bit, even if that's all he can do. "And then afterward—Tubbo, I need you to go through with all of us exactly what you know about—what did you call them? Dreamons?"

Tubbo looks slightly miserable, but he nods. "Right," he says. "I can try to ward the gates if you want. With, um, anti-demon stuff. I don't know if it'll work. I guess last time we didn't manage to do much of anything at all."

"Anti-what," Eret says, but Wilbur shakes his head.

"We don't have time for that. Tubbo will explain later. We—"

“The fuck am I supposed to do, then?” Tommy breaks in, crossing his arms. “You haven’t given me a job.” He glares, but it is so very obvious that it’s all a front, all a show, and Tommy’s expression dares him to challenge him, but Wilbur thinks that if he does, he just might break something in him. Tommy has always been so much more fragile than he presents himself as, so much more fragile than he likes to believe he is.

(despite it all, despite it all, he is only sixteen, only a child, a child grown old before his time but a child nonetheless, and now a child who watched his brother die for him, an estranged brother perhaps but still a brother, and Tommy has always cared so much and so deeply, no matter how much he pretends otherwise)

He hasn’t given Tommy a job, and he doesn’t really intend to, because Tommy, of all people, needs to sit the fuck down and rest for a moment. They all deserve a break, but in this moment, Tommy is the one who needs it most, and also the one least likely to accept as much.

If the general gives the order, Tommy will follow it, he knows that much,

(because he made his brother into a soldier he made his brother into a soldier and soldiers follow orders)

even if he’ll be angry at him for it, but Tommy angry with him is a sacrifice he’s willing to make. And perhaps directing his anger at him will help. Perhaps it would be better for Tommy to be angry with someone within reach rather than someone out of it.

(because Tommy is hurting, and the cause of that hurt is not here, and so perhaps if Wilbur offers himself he’ll feel better, will feel more in control, because Tommy needs control, because his abuser is out, is wandering free, and his abuser has killed their brother and told him that it is his fault)

But then, Phil breaks his silence.

“I’d like him to stick with me,” he says, with a smile that is obviously strained. “I’m not going to be able to reach everything myself.” He makes a vague gesture toward his wings, still dripping blood, and there is so much of it already drying on his feathers, sticky, tacky, almost blending in with the darkness of the feathers

(but stark against the grey-white of exposed bone)

“Why the actual shit—” Tommy starts.

“Good idea, Phil,” he cuts him off. “Tommy, help him with the wings, would you?”

“Why do I have to—”

“You too, Wil,” Phil says, and his mood sours immediately. “You think I don’t see that leg? C’mon, Eret, show us to the pots.”

When faced with that, he has no choice but to agree, really.

(he wouldn't have ignored it. he wouldn't have. He knows better than to leave a wound untreated in wartime. Even if something whispers at him that he deserves the pain, even if the bite of it brings him closer to reality. But his better sense knows: pain is not the penance that is asked of him, not a recompense that will do anyone any good)

They meet again half an hour later in Eret's throne room. Half an hour later, and his leg is bandaged and tender and no longer an open wound, and Tommy is frowning and refusing to meet anyone's eyes, and the state of Phil's wings is still bothersome, because he didn't let either of them touch them beyond what was necessary,

(and he recollects countless nights spent running his fingers through soft, silken feathers as his father told him how to preen them, told him that it was a sign of trust, an activity that only family, only *flock* is allowed, and now Phil will no longer let them near him, will no longer even take care of them *himself* and it makes him sick to his stomach to think of what has been lost)

but they are no longer bleeding, and that has to be what matters.

The throne room is not the best location for this, he thinks. It feels awkward. But it's a room big enough to fit everyone, which is the point, big enough to fit Puffy, presence looming and forehead now bandaged, to fit Sapnap, fidgety as he is, like a caged, snarling animal, all restless energy. Big enough for Tubbo, for Tommy, for Ranboo, for Phil, for Eret and for himself, and big enough that there is an obvious gap at Phil's right side where someone else should be standing.

Eret eyes her throne, glances at everyone else in the room, and then seats herself at its base. It's a pithy gesture, meaningless, but Wilbur has more important things to do than to call her out on it, even though the existence of the throne itself grates against him.

"Let's call this meeting to order, then," he says, and Eret frowns. Perhaps she doesn't like that he's calling the shots in her own

(ill-gotten, dearly kept)

castle, but tough. He's brought out the general for all of their sakes, so the general is what they're all going to get.

(it's a mask again and masks crack but he can keep it up for long enough he can he can they need a leader so he will lead he will lead them)

(you were so good at compartmentalizing, once, go good at shoving it all away in boxes in dark shadowy corners never to be opened to gather dust and cobwebs and faded recollections but the boxes cracked and the demon's escaped and Pandora was too weak to stop them and it all ended in a bang and he cannot tell if hope remains but that isn't the point because the

box is opened and once opened it is not so easily closed and you are putting on a show a lie and lies come back around again they always do and you should know better than to pretend at strength you do not have you will lead them to ruin again ruin and gunpowder smoke and what gives you the right)

“Yeah, alright,” Puffy says. “Can we start by talking about—whatever that was? What were you talking about, dreamons? What’s a dreamon?”

“That sounds like a made up word,” Tommy mutters.

“I wish it were made up,” Tubbo says, and he winces when all eyes turn to him. But a moment later, he straightens, setting his shoulders squarely, holding his head up high. “I’ll tell you all what I know. Even if that turns out to be not as much as I thought.” He pauses, clearly struggling for words.

“Start from the beginning,” he suggests, and Tubbo nods at him gratefully.

“Okay, right, the beginning,” he says. “In the very beginning, me and Fundy were messing around, and we found some old books. We went through them for a laugh, and we learned about these things called dreamons.”

“Wait, that’s what they’re actually called?” Tommy interjects. “Like, properly?”

Tubbo shrugs. “It’s what the books said,” he says. “We weren’t about to argue over names. Even if it did seem like a weird coincidence. But yeah, that’s what they’re called.” His voice falls into an odd cadence here, recitative, like he’s telling a story, and Wilbur crosses his arms, gripping at his elbows. “They come from the darkness of the void, lurking around the edges of a server’s code. Once they get in, their only goal is to cause chaos and destruction. They corrupt everything they touch, and they can possess people and turn them into their puppets. They have unknowable powers, because they’re a sickness, a rot, like an infection in the code of the server itself. It’s really, really difficult to get rid of them, but it can be done if you have the right tools. Or—” He blinks, stuttering a bit, his voice landing more naturally. “We thought so, anyway.”

“What does this have to do with *Dream*?” Sapnap asks, stopping his pacing, looking to Tubbo with an expression in his eyes that hurts to look at, a bit, wobbly and desperate and pinched, like he already knows the answer but hopes that he’s wrong, hopes as much as he is able, even though he knows it will be fruitless.

Wilbur has put the pieces together. As best he can, anyway. And Sapnap’s not a stupid man. He can see where this is leading.

“Dream got possessed.” Tubbo sighs, gaze drifting toward the floor. “It was a whole thing. Honestly, we were surprised nobody else noticed. But we—we performed an exorcism. And it was really scary, to be honest. But it worked. We could *see* it leave, all oozy and black and gross, and Dream was better afterward! He was! So we thought we got it out.”

“But it tricked you?” he asks.

“I don’t understand how it could have,” Tubbo replies. “It’s not—it’s not like the kind of possession that you see in a TV show, where the demon can pretend to be the person or something like that. It’s *obvious*. It’s too—it’s too *wrong* to blend in, if that makes sense. It made his voice go all funny and deep, and the way it moved—” He shudders, and then continues, miserably, “The way it moved, there’s no way you could mistake something like that for a human. That’s why we were so sure it worked. Because afterward, he seemed back to normal.”

Something about this doesn’t make sense.

“Tubbo,” he says, wheels spinning in his mind, “when was this?”

Tubbo blinks. “Manberg days,” he says. “Um, that’s why we never told you about it, I suppose.”

He barely bats an eye at the reference. It doesn’t make sense. Because he has sensed that *wrongness*, as Tubbo puts it, has been sensing it from the moment he set foot in that prison cell for the first time. On some level, he knew that something was deeply wrong, even if a demonic presence was the last thing he would have guessed. But if the whole thing happened during—during *that* time, and the signs of possession were as obvious as Tubbo says, he would have noticed, wouldn’t he? He had plenty of interactions with Dream during that time.

(unless his own shadows stretched long, stretched far enough to cover Dream’s, to cover the thing piloting him)

But no—his shadows were of his own making, not supernatural. If anything, his mindset should have made him more receptive to suspicious *wrongness*, not less. So what—

(*Dream smiles, and you know what it’s like, to have something whispering in your head, he says, once you let something in, there’s no going back*)

“Maybe the first bit was a fakeout,” Phil suggests, arms folded, head tilted. He’s perplexed, which is worrying; it’s rare to come across a being that Phil knows nothing about. “It made itself obvious to lure you in so it could slip under the radar. Faked leaving to put your guard down, maybe.”

It’s plausible. But somehow

(*and Dream stands atop the Egg and he says, he says, I tried to fight at first, but it turns out it was right all along, and he says it he says it like it’s separate from him like there is not something else something other speaking from his mouth after all and he tried to fight it he tried to fight it and what does that mean*)

“They’re the same,” he breathes, and doesn’t know what he means, not quite yet, “they’re the same, and the Egg controls people, and he was talking about fighting something, about giving in—”

He runs a hand through his hair. Shakes his head.

“Wil?” Phil asks.

“Oi, Wilbur,” Tommy says, almost at the same time. But he needs to—he needs to focus as the pieces click into place, faster than he can process, and he has a conclusion but not the words yet—

He holds up a hand.

“Tubbo,” he says, “you said it can corrupt things. What did you mean by that?”

“I dunno, really,” he says. “It talked about it in the books some, but it was all weird metaphorical language. Couldn’t really makes sense of it. We were more focused on the bits that told us how to get rid of them.”

(he says, you know what the void is like, and Tubbo says that they come from the void, and)

That’s alright. He’s not sure he needs a hard answer to that, because he thinks that if one were to describe the feeling of the corruption, it would be

(it is dark and it is peaceful and there is static at the edges eating away at what makes him himself eating at his soul at his sense of self and it is what he wants, to be nothing, and he does not imagine what it would feel like if it were not what he desired, if he tried to resist it, resist the void all-consuming, all-devouring, resist the void that takes all things into itself and is never satiated)

something familiar.

“Alright,” he says, and steeples his fingers together. “Let me paint a picture for you. Someone gets possessed. You exorcise the thing. But these things can corrupt, you say. So maybe you get rid of the thing itself. Maybe Dream’s pretty much back to normal. But maybe it leaves little bits of itself behind. Maybe he’s not possessed, but maybe that doesn’t matter so much anymore. Maybe it changed him regardless. Maybe it’s still changing him, even though it’s no longer there. Maybe a corruption took root, and there wasn’t any going back from it.” He tilts his head, closes his eyes. “Suppose that the Egg is the same type of thing. Something that forced its way through the cracks of the server, something that’s been smart about it, biding its time. The things that Dream was saying reminded me a lot of what the Egg was doing, you know? Manipulating people, making them into things they aren’t, or into their worst selves.”

He strings the words together as he goes. He’s not sure he’s getting his point across. He used to be so much better at this.

“Wait, so you’re saying you think he *isn’t* possessed?” Sapnap asks.

“I’m saying we don’t really know,” he answers. “Not unless we get it from him. But Tubbo’s the expert here, and if he says Dream’s not acting like he’s possessed, I believe him. But even if he’s not possessed outright, that doesn’t mean there’s no—influence, perhaps.” He keeps his eyes shut; the darkness on the back of his eyelids is a natural one, but he can almost pretend that it isn’t. That it is darker, deeper.

(void)

“He was right that I know what it’s like,” he says. “I’ve felt the Egg in my head. And I was in the void for—a long time. It felt like forever. I know what it feels like, and there’s some of it in him, I think. Him and the Egg both. They’re the same kind of wrong, the same kind of unbelonging. I’ve never been possessed by a demon before, but if it’s made up of void stuff, that’s the sort of thing that stays with you. Whispering.”

He opens his eyes. Everyone is staring at him, varying expressions of horror on their faces.

He goes back over his words. In retrospect, he can see how they probably came off sounding.

“Wil,” Phil says softly.

“I’m fine,” he says, not at all convincingly, he’s sure.

(once he starts thinking of the void of the peace and of the rest it’s hard to stop even though his desires are now tinged with red and he knows better than to listen but he cannot help himself)

“This is all speculation, anyway,” he continues. “Might not matter at all, in the end, what the particulars are. We just need a way to stop them. Can dreamons be killed, Tubbo?”

Tubbo takes a moment before replying. “I don’t think so,” he says. “Fundy might remember better. But I think the only thing in what we read was the exorcism.”

“Which doesn’t help us much if Dream’s not actually possessed,” Puffy says. “Unless it might work on the Egg? If the Egg’s a—a dreamon too?”

“Worth a shot if we can get to it again,” he says, “but I don’t like risking so much on a maybe.”

“The less we mess with forces beyond our understanding, the better,” Eret says suddenly. She frowns, pushing her sunglasses further up her face. “As I said earlier, I’ve been away a good bit recently, so I haven’t been tracking the Egg’s progress as much as perhaps I should have. But I did notice an increase in activity—well. It was shortly after we tried to resurrect you, Wilbur.” She inclines her head toward him. “I fear that in our efforts, we might have interfered with something we shouldn’t have interfered with. Weakened a barrier of some kind, between our existence and—something else.”

She speaks with a strange kind of gravity. But her words make an unfortunate kind of sense.

He doesn’t look at Phil.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Tommy states. “What the fuck does that even mean?”

“I’m with Tommy on this one. What are you talking about?” Sapnap adds.

“We’re getting off track,” he says, snapping his fingers. “We’re going about this wrong. We don’t have enough information, and we don’t have enough power. Those are our problems.

How do we solve them?"

"The obvious would be to get the word out," Puffy says. "Comms are down, but we can go by word of mouth if we have to. Kinda risky, with the amount of vines on this server, but the nether portal's right across the way. No vines in the nether, I think."

"I have lots of old books myself," Phil chimes in, eyes skyward. "Might be something in there to help that I've read and forgotten about. And I've got another source of info I've barely begun to go through. Old shit I found. It might be worth a shot." He looks back down. "We need to go get Techno anyway." He says the last in a tone that brooks no argument, and Wilbur doesn't try, even if it's perhaps not the most tactically sound option.

(he wants Techno back too, wants to lay eyes on him, hold his wrist in his hand and count his heartbeats, each one a reassurance, because he knows what it is for a brother to die and come back but that has never made it easier)

"It's better than nothing," he says. "Alright, I've got a plan, then. Some of us go to the tundra, get Technoblade, and go through whatever books Phil has. Some stay here and fortify the defenses as best we can using what Tubbo can remember that he thinks might work, and a couple of us go around through the nether and tell as many people as possible what's going on. Gather allies, resources anything else we might need."

It's not much of a plan. But based on just how outclassed they are, just how little they know, just how much exhaustion shows in their faces, it might be the best plan they're going to get for now. To throw themselves back into a battle so soon would be folly.

It never sits well with him to bank so much on a hope, though, a mere possibility that things will go their way.

(but certainties were ripped out from under him the moment Dream killed the unkillable, the moment he saw his brother crumple to ash before his eyes)

"Great," Puffy says, grimacing. "What could possibly go wrong with that?"

The silence that greets that statement serves perfectly well as a response.

He closes his eyes again. The darkness is no comfort.

Chapter End Notes

All I have to say here is this: c!Eret, my beloved.

Sorry to leave you all on such a tragic note last chapter! Hopefully this one's a bit better. But thank you so, so much for the response you gave me! I know I say this every time, but nothing warms my heart more!

My tumblr is [here](#) if you'd like to stop by! Or to read drabbles and ficlets that don't get posted to my ao3. For instance, if you happen to be looking for a cathartic cry about Ghostbur, [I've got a thing for that](#). :)

I'm currently neck-deep in final projects and essays, so for one last time, I'm going to have to go two weeks before posting the next chapter. Chapter thirteen will be out on May 14th! After that, I'll be done with my semester, so weekly updates should resume. Thank you guys for your patience!

Next up, Chapter Thirteen: In which they head for the tundra, Technoblade is having kind of a rough time, and Wilbur looks at some interesting furniture.

wipe the dirt off of your hands (i)

Chapter Notes

This chapter's gonna be another two-parter you guys, mainly because I simply didn't have time to write everything that I was planning to write these past two weeks. Though tbh I probably would have split it anyway, because this is about half of what I wanted to include and it's still 5k, so.

But on the bright side! I'm out of school! I made it! So weekly updates should resume from now on, now that I actually have time to write during the week. I'm very excited!

Content warnings this chapter for swearing, blood, and referenced (temporary) character death.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They settle on two hours as a timeline. Two hours before they leave: he, Phil, Tommy, and Tubbo, the four of them off to the tundra. He's left the rest of them to decide whether they want to stay in the castle or be among those braving the rest of the server in order to warn the others, to bring anyone who wants to come back with them to their base of operations. Safe and sound, or as much as anyone can be, now.

Two hours. It feels like too long. Dream could be doing anything with that time. The Egg could be doing anything with that time. He feels restless, irritated at the wait, even though he knows it makes sense, knows that pushing everyone too hard too soon will do more harm than good, that two hours, in the grand scheme of things, isn't very long.

(but isn't it, though? two hours can change the tide of a battle, can mean the difference between success and failure, life and death, a surrender and a victory)

He finds himself pacing the hallways of the castle.

It's in greater disrepair than he expected. Almost every room he walks into is coated in dust. No one has stayed here in—months, probably. No one other than Eret, perhaps, and he said he'd been away. It puts him in a strange mood; he remembers this place when it was new, when it was lived in, spilling over with light and movement, and he hated it then, of course, hated what it stood for, what it represented, but it made others happy. Niki, for one; she always liked Eret, despite his efforts to persuade her otherwise. Fundy,

(and the memory is fuzzy, indistinct, because Ghostbur did not want to remember this, did not want to confront his own inadequacy, but Fundy stands in front of him with papers clutched in his hand and he's saying something about adoption and all that he feels is crushing abandonment, crushing guilt, and it is wiped away in the blue only a moment later but for that moment, he is overwhelmed by the knowledge that he has failed his son, failed

him badly enough that he would run to the arms of a traitor, and the word *adoption* drips like sodden soil, drips like words that die useless on his tongue)

because he always liked Eret too, even though he was there that day, even though he lost a life to his machinations, his betrayal, even though he should have known better. He's pretty sure he remembers HBomb staying here as well, though he never knew the man well enough to pay attention. But now there is no one, and the castle is empty, and every step he takes feels haunted by ghosts of people that still live.

The castle is a relic. Perhaps he is one, too. A relic of an older time. This server has moved on, has changed so much, and he plays at being the general again, puts on the general's mask as it is needed, but he doesn't know if that's right, if it makes any difference at all, if the general can find his footing in an altered world. How useful is a general that doesn't know the lay of the land?

(how useful is a general who has not won the war within himself?)

(the part of you that could lead broke a long time ago and you know it and it was not the ravine that did it you were broken before then broken under the weight of a position you did not know how to handle and your shining city stood for freedom stood for those you wanted to protect but it became harder and harder to get out of bed in the morning and you crumpled crumpled like wet paper like the documents that signed your emancipation and meant nothing at all in the end because the ideals fell apart long before you set the final nail in the coffin you built for yourself)

Two hours. Less than that, by now, surely. If Phil were to see him, he'd tell him to rest. Perhaps that's part of why he's doing this. Wandering alone. Because if Phil were to see him, he'd tell him to rest,

(hypocrite that he is, because Wilbur knows that Phil is not resting, knows that he's situated himself at the castle's highest turret, eyes cast to the distance, shoulders tense and posture still, waiting, a live wire)

but he cannot, cannot dispel the energy that buzzes through him, even though his mind is fogged with exhaustion. He cannot rest, and not least because he doesn't know what kind of dreams would greet him, what would rise out of the darkness now that he knows precisely what lurks within it.

So he walks. Walks, and walks, and tries not to count the minutes as they pass, walks several laps through the castle's corridors before the sound of voices breaks him out of his fugue.

“—talking about?” someone says, and it's Tommy. He slows to a stop outside of a closed door, identical to all the rest but for the fact that there is someone inside.

“I mean it,” comes the reply. Tubbo. His voice is muffled by the barrier between them, but Wilbur can understand him perfectly. And for a moment, he considers moving onward. Whatever they're discussing, they don't need him listening in on it.

Instead, he inches closer, and leans against the wall just outside the door. The stone is hard against his back, unforgiving, cold.

“I can do the most good here,” Tubbo continues. “You all don’t need me to come with you to get Technoblade. That’s—Tommy, this is serious, you know?”

“I fucking know,” Tommy snaps. “I don’t see why that means you’ve got to stay behind.”

“Because I can actually help here,” Tubbo replies, his voice rising slightly. “Tommy—listen, Tommy, I know about these kinds of things. Not enough, but some, and I can help. I can try to keep it out. I can put enchantments all over the place and stuff like that, try to make sure it can’t get to us. Try and make it a safe place. That’s something we need right now.” He pauses. “Take Ranboo with you instead, yeah? He lives up there, he’s close with Techno, he should go.”

“I don’t want to *leave* you here,” Tommy says.

Wilbur closes his eyes. There is more emotion in his voice than this situation alone would warrant, he thinks. More history. More history that he, perhaps, is not privy to. That he hasn’t asked about, that he didn’t want to ask about, because he didn’t want to prod at wounds that have not yet closed. He regrets it, now. Perhaps then he would have context for the crack in Tommy’s voice.

“I know,” Tubbo says, his voice soft. “But you’ve got to. We’ve got to do what we’ve got to do now, big man. You and Wil go get Techno and look at Phil’s books. I’ll be here when you get back.”

He expects strong words from Tommy at that. But instead there is silence. Wilbur strains to hear, leans in closer, but there is nothing.

“This isn’t like then,” Tubbo says after a moment. “We’re both safe. Wilbur won’t let anything happen to you. And nobody here’s gonna let anything happen to me. I’ve got Eret, and Sapnap, and Puffy.”

“Oh, well, if *Eret’s* here,” Tommy mutters, and Wilbur jerks. Tommy’s voice is choked, wet, and for a second, his instinct is to open the door, to step inside and offer what comfort he can, but his feet feel glued to the floor.

(this is not for you not for you to heal these hurts when the root of the hurt is of you this is them their moment and you are on the outside looking in a trespasser and if you move anywhere it must be to go)

“I thought you forgave Eret,” Tubbo says.

“I do,” Tommy replies. “This is—this isn’t *about* that, and you know it, I just—”

“I know,” Tubbo says, “I do, I know.”

There is silence after that. A rustle of clothing. And then a few muffled noises. Wilbur knows all too well what it sounds like, someone crying into someone else, allowing themselves a

moment of grief, of terror, of unbridled emotion. He should leave. Leave them to it. Leave them to this. It's the least he can do; this is his fault, his fault that they're involved in this, his fault that they've been dragged into conflict once again, his fault that anything terrible happened to them at all. His fault they're not all still at home, on a server far away, in the house that he and Tommy grew up in and that Tubbo may as well have.

(you took them with you and made soldiers out of them, soldiers out of children. you took them with you and set the weight of the world on their shoulders, and the way their eyes dimmed is because of you. the burn scars on Tubbo's face, the tremble in Tommy's fingers that he tries fruitlessly to hide, this is all because of you. you took children and gave them grownups' clothes and grownups' weapons and guided their hands to pierce the heart, guided their hands with your own and claimed the blood for yours though it did not change the way their hands were painted, and then you abandoned them, abandoned them to yourself and then, at the last, fully, abandoned them in every way possible, abandoned them to the wolves and the ruins and you should have known better, should have known that even if the land was not important to you it was important to these children, these children you sent to hell with songs on their lips)

(but then, there is this also: they would not have had it any other way. they looked at you with stars in their eyes, and perhaps they were blinded by the fire of you, but they loved you. they loved you then, and they love you still. and they will follow you yet despite it all despite what you have done they will follow you and their eyes are open to what you are and they still follow and it must be for love little though you deserve it it must be for love because love is not about deserving)

He breathes. Puts his back to the wall, and then slides down. Sits. Listens to Tommy cry. Presses his eyes shut, and then presses the palms of his hands to his eyes until spots of color flicker on the back of his eyelids.

He stays there for a long time before lurching to his feet once again.

"I didn't miss this," Tommy mutters, rubbing his arms, glaring balefully at Phil as if he controls the weather.

Phil offers a short laugh. Out of all of them, he's the only one really dressed for the climate; Eret offered them all heavier coats before they left, but there's heavier coats and then there's coats meant for a blizzard, and these are not the latter.

"We've got some better stuff once we get to the house," Phil says. "I'll make us some hot drinks, too."

"I don't want your stupid tea," Tommy says, but he seems mollified.

“I’ll take some tea,” Ranboo says immediately afterward, and Wilbur is having to slowly revise his opinion of this kid. Anxious as all hell, sure. A bit of a pushover, definitely. But he’s got a streak of hardness in him, though he tends to back down upon being challenged. Like right now: Tommy directs his glare toward him, and he apologizes immediately. But he’s a bit of an enigma, this Ranboo. Hidden depths. And Ghostbur liked him, which doesn’t always count for anything, but in this case, he thinks it might.

“Everyone who wants some tea can have some tea,” Phil says, another laugh in his voice. He looks a bit better than he did earlier, though his smile seems strained, his movements rushed, obviously anticipating their arrival at their destination. His wings are hidden again, disguised underneath a thick cloak, and Wilbur hates it all the more, if that’s possible, now that he understands exactly why. He remembers Phil telling him, once, that he disliked keeping his wings under his clothes, that it was uncomfortable, itchy, cramped. And now Phil does it as if it is second nature.

“I wouldn’t mind some tea,” he says softly, and glances away when Phil looks at him.

“Of course, Wil,” Phil says, matching his tone, and then they pass out from under the trees, and Technoblade’s quaint little cottage comes into view.

The windows are dark. No smoke rises from the chimney. It’s a far cry from the last time he saw it, when it seemed to him a bastion against the pervasive chill outside, warm and welcoming, no matter his trepidation about who waited within.

“Well, that’s ominous,” Tommy says, and Wilbur winces.

“Maybe he’s sleeping?” Ranboo tries. “I’ve never lost a life here, but, um, y’know, I used to live on Hypixel. Did some of the arena stuff, respawned a few times. It always made me tired.”

“That’s probably it,” Phil agrees, but his eyes are pinched, and Wilbur can tell that he’s worried. It is an easy thing to read, Phil’s worry. Easy to read, for how common it is. He strains to remember whether this stress he carries with him was nearly as prevalent when they were kids, and he comes up empty.

“Well, let’s go wake him up, then,” Tommy declares, and strides forward with determination, still talking. “I fucking hate this place, it’s such a stupid little house—” Ranboo follows after him, but Wilbur grabs Phil by the arm, delaying him for a second even as he tracks the kids’ progress ahead of them, like they’ll fall into some misfortune if he looks away for a moment.

“You’re worried,” he says.

“Respawn can be tough,” Phil says. “I need to lay eyes on him for myself.”

He knows, of course, what Phil is talking about. He remembers the sensation all too well. Remembers the pain

(in his throat as Punz slashed it, his lifeblood spilling out on his hands as he clutched the wound, his voice silenced, silenced as he tried to breathe but choked on thick copper and it

took him a full minute to bleed out on the floor, every second edged with desperate, consuming fear)

(in his back as Punz's shot sailed true, hit his heart, his vision darkening around the edges as terror flooded him, terror not just for him but for Tommy, for *Tommy*, his little brother who he never intended to bring down with him)

of dying, and then the void, but not the true void, not the void he remembers all too well,

(not the void that cradled him even as it ate away at all he was)

but a transition, a place both within life and out of it, and a howling second-minute-hour in which he could feel nothing at all. And then, slamming back into consciousness, every nerve burning with the phantom agony of disembodiment, of every cell destroyed and then forced back together, made anew,

(but there was no time to rest no time to work through it because they needed to go needed to run)

gasping back to the living world shaking and barely cognizant.

Respawn can be tough. Is tough. He knows that Techno has experienced it before, if rarely, but that was on different worlds, worlds that do not limit a person's lives. He has not lost one here. Has not lost one that counted so dearly.

But there is nothing to do now but walk forward.

The house is cold, the fire unlit. Tommy has sobered, and his arms are crossed, almost hugging himself. Ranboo shifts uneasily, gaze flickering around the ground floor, the unlit furnaces, the chests stacked against each other, the windows slanting thin light into the room. Wilbur catches Phil's eye, and Phil sighs.

"Up here," he says, and starts up the ladder. He waits a beat before following, something in him oddly reluctant.

He didn't venture up here, when he visited—how long ago? Not more than two weeks.

(two weeks breathing, two weeks living, and it feels like so, so much longer)

He's not sure what he was expecting from Techno's room, but it was probably something like this: chests shoved against the wall, a bell out on display, an emerald block for good measure, bookshelves in every available space. It is very Techno, sparse and yet not, filled with only the things he cares deeply about, cramped but lived-in. But the bed is empty, and it takes a moment for Wilbur to spot where Techno is. When he does, his heart leaps into his throat.

Techno is sitting against the wall, and on first glance, he looks fine. But only on a first glance, because a second tells Wilbur that his breathing is labored, his eyes screwed tightly shut, sweat beading his forehead. His fists are clenched, and fine tremors run through his body, a constant shuddering that must be exhausting.

There is a new scar on his neck. Thick and white.

Ranboo makes a sound, a startled warble. Tommy inhales sharply, and is silent.

Wilbur feels frozen where he stands.

Respawn can be tough. But somehow, this feels like something else.

(his brother is supposed to be invincible unstoppable impervious to pain he is not supposed to be hurt he is not supposed to be hurt and he doesn't know what to do for something of this magnitude because he knows how to help when the voices get too loud when his voices drown out everything else and give him migraines but this is not that this is deeper than that worse than that)

Phil steps forward, robes swishing as he kneels by Techno's side. His hands hover, but he does not touch. Wilbur wants to join him, wants to help, but he still can't make himself move. He's not sure why this sight has frozen him so; perhaps it's because he wasn't prepared for it, even with all his knowledge of the possibilities, even being well aware that no one comes out of losing a life unscathed, ready to jump back into battle, not even Technoblade.

Perhaps there really isn't anything that can prepare him to see his brother in pain. Even now.

(and the general is useless here, because this is family)

"Hey," Phil says quietly. "Techno? You awake?"

To his surprise, Techno stirs. Shifts just a bit in place, wincing, and then his eyes crack open. They are dazed, glazed over, the usually piercing red dull and clouded and—

Gold. There is gold in his eyes, too, flickering, flashing, and every time Wilbur catches a glimpse of it, Techno jerks, a convulsion just barely distinguishable from the rest of his shaking. It is a shimmering gold, the same color as the burst of light that hailed his resurrection, that hailed his renewal, that hailed *Technoblade never dies*, the burst of energy that vibrated in his bones and sent heat skidding across his skin. The light of the totem is in Techno's eyes, somehow, and it—

It is hurting him.

"Shit," Phil mutters. "I was worried about this. Techno, can you hear me?"

Techno swallows, his throat bobbing, and Wilbur's eyes are drawn

(Dream's axe in his throat and the blood spurts hot and red and he only has a moment to stare at the gaping wound before the sentence comes down and his brother is)

to the scar again. Almost imperceptibly, Techno nods.

"Okay," Phil says, and his hands finally land, one on Techno's shoulder and one on his hand, and Techno immediately grasps his fingers in a death grip. Phil winces, but makes no protest.

“Okay, you’re gonna be okay, Techno. Not much to do but wait it out, but I can get you some pots that should help. Would that be okay?”

Technoblade huffs, and then nods. Again, just slightly. His eyes flicker around the room, half-lidded, and Wilbur’s not even sure that he’s aware they’re all there, except then, his gaze lands on Tommy and stays there. Tommy flinches, face paling, and he edges back toward the ladder, hands clenching and unclenching, like he thinks that Techno is going to leap up and attack him, somehow, in this state.

(but that’s not it at all—*this* is the attack, seeing him in this way, seeing him weakened, seeing the result of the action he took, because Wilbur knows himself and he knows Tommy, and he knows that for all his efforts, Tommy takes after him in some ways. Tommy internalizes a lot. internalizes blame, takes responsibility for things outside of his control, things with vast, terrible consequences, even as he avoids responsibility for minor faults, things that no one takes much issue with in the first place. he’s strange like that, Tommy, but he knows all too well that Tommy watched Technoblade die in front of him, for him, and decided immediately that it was his fault. he would have done the same thing. has been doing the same thing)

(Dream’s voice, smooth and confident and hated: *how many people are gonna have to sacrifice themselves for you before you learn?*)

(the answer: at least one more, always one more, but somebody needs to get it through Tommy’s skull that he is worth it, worth a sacrifice, worth everything that people are willing to give him and more. someone needs to tell him, because he doesn’t think he knows)

Technoblade grunts something, short and clipped, and it takes him a second to realize he’s speaking in Piglin. Not for the first time, he regrets his barely rudimentary knowledge of the language. But Phil understands, and something that is just slightly too pained to be a real smile passes across his face. He answers in kind, and Technoblade relaxes marginally. He sighs, eyes falling shut, and he tips forward a bit, resting his head against Phil’s chest. Phil begins carding a hand through his hair, the motion seemingly automatic.

“Any of you have a weakness pot on you?” Phil asks, switching to the common tongue. “Healing and regen will do more harm than good for him right now. Best thing for him to do is sleep through it.”

He certainly doesn’t. Tommy shakes his head mutely. But Ranboo raises a tentative hand.

“I don’t have any on me, but I might have one at my house?” he offers. “I can go see.”

Phil nods. “Thank you, Ranboo,” he says, and Ranboo nods back, climbing down the ladder, casting once last glance at Techno before he goes. The front door opens and shuts a moment later, and the four of them are alone.

“What’s wrong with him, then?” Tommy asks, after a pregnant silence. “I mean. Respawn fucking sucks. But why is he like this?”

He's trying too hard not to sound concerned. No one in this room is going to fall for it, except maybe Techno, who seems too out of it to be listening at all, really. But Phil doesn't call him on it, just grimaces.

"I've seen it a few times before," he says lowly. "Various wars I've been in. People could use a totem and then die again in their next breath, if they were unlucky. Respawning from that is always difficult, because the magic from the totem doesn't have time to work its way out of your system, and it's not the kind of thing that a respawn wipes away. It's the opposite, actually. So he's still got that shit raging through him, except now there's nothing for it to do, so it's stuck there until it dissipates. And it's not—it's not pleasant, from what I've seen. That shit's potent. Not good to have it in you for too long."

"And there's nothing we can do about it?" he checks.

"Short of killing him again? No," Phil says. "Even that might not work. It's been a few hours, so he should be coming out of the worst of it pretty soon. But until then, he just needs to rest."

"C'n hear you," Techno mumbles suddenly. He shifts so that his face is half-visible, and Wilbur's not sure he remembers the last time he saw his brother look so vulnerable.

(on a stage in front of a crowd, perhaps, perhaps, peer pressure that he knew Techno would be unable to withstand, an impossible situation laid out before him, to blow his cover or not, to blow his cover and ensure the death of he and Tubbo alike, perhaps, perhaps, and which is better, to pull the trigger and save yourself or refuse and damn you both? but Techno made his choice, and he can only imagine what his face was doing, because a mask covered his expression that day, as it did so many of those days, a barrier between him and his brother. a barrier between the man he became, dark and shadowed and laying out plot threads like he thought himself one of the Fates, a man with the power to chose his own archetype, a barrier between that man and the man he strung along in his wake, cold, impersonal, intimidating, distant, and nothing like what he should have been. what they should have been, together)

It is hard to imagine that this man prides himself on being undefeated. Hard to imagine that only hours ago

(and it feels like days, like weeks, like a *month*)

this man was gleefully engaging Dream in combat, was winning before Dream decided to play dirty, before he dragged Tommy into it, before he took advantage of what he must have known Technoblade would do if Tommy was threatened, if his final life hung in the balance. Because for all his feelings of betrayal, for all his insistence that he's done, finished with them, finished with trying, finished with involving himself in their troubles when he gets nothing in return, for all of that—

For all of that, Technoblade still cares for them. He knows that. And Technoblade is loyal to those he loves. Despite it all.

(and it is a bitter pill to swallow, after everything, but if Techno did not want to stand by their sides, he would not have come, whether Phil asked it of him or not. but he did. he did, and

this is the price, the consequence)

“Yeah? Then can you hear me calling you a bitch?” Tommy says, and absolutely none of his usual bravado makes it into his voice.

Techno huffs, and if he’s going to say anything, it gets interrupted by the door down below opening and closing again, and then the ladder creaking as Ranboo climbs up.

“Weakness potion,” he says, holding it out, and Phil accepts it, handling it where Techno can see it.

“Taking this ought to help, Tech,” he murmurs. “I know it’s not your first choice, but there’s no point in you being awake while your body sorts this shit out.”

Techno flicks his fingers, a gesture that might loosely be interpreted as meaning *go ahead*, and then he sags, as if even doing that much has taken up all the energy he has left. But Phil takes it as an affirmative, and he guides the flask up to Techno’s lips, and Wilbur looks away as he prods Techno into swallowing its contents. It feels strangely intimate, uncomfortable, like he’s intruding on something private. Which should be a ridiculous thought; this is his father and his brother, and perhaps he’s never seen Techno hurt as bad as this, but he’s seen him hurt, and Phil has taken care of all of them like this at one point or another.

(but you see this and you cannot help but project and perhaps the intimacy discomfits you because it is not for you because you cannot help but imagine it for yourself and come to the conclusion that you do not deserve it would not deserve it if your positions were reversed)

(or perhaps you see this, and you see yourself standing there, doing nothing, not even speaking a word, and you just feel useless)

“He’s out,” Phil says, only a beat later. “He should be better by tomorrow, maybe even tonight if we’re lucky. These things just need to run their course.” He smooths a bit of hair back from Techno’s face, which is more peaceful now, slack in sleep, only a vague tightness to hint at disquiet.

“Um, well that’s good,” Ranboo says. “What do we do until then?”

“What we came here to do,” Phil says, and gets to his feet, lifting Technoblade in his arms in the same motion. It looks a bit awkward; Techno has more than a foot on Phil, but Phil carries him to his bed with apparent ease. “We came here for information, so that’s what we’ll try to find.” He pauses, frowning. “I don’t like leaving him alone in this state, but he should be alright, and we’ll be—”

“I’ll stay with him,” Tommy says.

Wilbur blinks. Tommy scowls. He looks a bit surprised, almost, like he didn’t expect the words to come out of his mouth. But when faced with the attention of the entire room, he doubles down on it.

“Look, someone should make sure he doesn’t keel over again in his sleep, right?” he says. “Not that I *care*, but it’d be—it’d be downright inconvenient, now, wouldn’t it? So someone oughta stay, and if we’re gonna be looking at, at books and shit, well, that’s not really my thing. Could be, if I wanted to! But y’know, it’s boring, and I have better things to do quite often. Like, like women and shit. So, maybe if you want to be doing research, I’m not—ugh, maybe I’m not the best man to help with that. So I can stay here with him.”

Phil cocks his head, apparently bemused. “I suppose?” he says. “But, Tommy, are you sure —”

“Oh Prime, *yes*,” Tommy says, and flaps a hand at all of them. “I wouldn’t say it if I wasn’t sure, would I? So go and, go and look through all your stupid old man books, and I’ll stay here. Look, he’s even got a seat for me already.” He stalks across the room and throws himself down on the emerald block, pulling his legs up to sit criss-cross. “It’s like it was made for me. An e-mer-ald throne. Go on. Shoo. Fuck right off.”

His cheeks are a bit flushed. Embarrassment, no doubt, at being caught caring about Technoblade, because that’s what this is, deep down. But he’s fidgeting, too, like he’s nervous, though nervous about what, Wilbur isn’t sure. Nervous about being alone in a room with Techno? Maybe, except Techno is out like a light. Nervous about the rest of them confronting him on it? Also maybe, and Phil looks confused enough to push him on it, so Wilbur decides to step in.

“Good of you to volunteer, Tommy,” he says. “Come get us if he starts making odd sounds or something, I suppose.”

Tommy pulls a face. “Odd sounds,” he repeats dubiously. “That right there, I don’t appreciate the way you said that.”

“Ookay,” Phil says. “Right, then. Come get us if you need us, Tommy. Wil, Ranboo, I’ll show you where we’re going.”

Wilbur follows Phil back down the ladder. But not before looking at the scene one last time. Techno in bed, dead to the world. Tommy perched on an emerald block, staring at their brother with intensity, something dark and inscrutable flashing in his eyes. Wilbur wonders at the wisdom of leaving Tommy alone here. There is bad blood between them. Bad blood, despite what Techno just did. And it hurts a bit, having to consider things like this, having to consider the likelihood of his brothers trying to murder each other if they’re left alone together,

(and it is partially his fault, he knows, one more thing to add to the list, the pit looming large in his memories)

but there’s nothing for it now. If he brings his concerns up, Tommy will just buckle down further, his pride rearing up. So Wilbur follows Phil and Ranboo down the ladder, and tries to think positively.

It’s difficult. He’s out of practice at it.

“Alright,” Phil says, and once again, Wilbur is struck by how old he looks, how worn down. “Suppose I’ll show you two the stronghold, then.”

A beat passes.

“The *what*—”

Chapter End Notes

Ending's a little abrupt, I feel, but next chapter will be a direct continuation of this one, so I'm not too bothered by it. Hope y'all enjoyed, even if we didn't actually get to the stronghold this chapter like I planned!

Thank you all again, just, so much, for all your support, and also your patience this last month or so as I went to updates very two weeks instead of one. It really means a lot to me! <3

Also, I wanted to mention, someone dm'd me on tumblr a bit ago asking about fanart? And I just wanted to say here that literally, if you make me fanart I will love you forever. Consider this blanket permission to do whatever you want! I only ask that if you're on tumblr, you tag me ([@onecanonlife](#)), and if you're on another platform, let me know in the comments here so I can go see it!! Fanart is so very pog, I admire artists to no end, you guys are amazing!

Next up, Chapter Fourteen: In which Wilbur actually looks at furniture this time (and the furniture is the end portal table, I'm just gonna say it), meets someone who once again challenges everything he thinks he knows about this whole situation, and Technoblade becomes cognizant enough to hold a full conversation. Which goes... interestingly, considering.

wipe the dirt off of your hands (ii)

Chapter Notes

I wanted to make a note here that there's another straight-up divergence from canon in this chapter, in that people are well aware of what the End Portal is and what it does. I really just... couldn't figure out how to make it make sense for them not to know, especially since I've already established that other servers and some game mechanics are canon for this fic. So, there's that!

Content warnings for this chapter include swearing, referenced character death, and slight manipulation.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil and Technoblade found the server's stronghold. Because *of course they did*. Nevermind that the End is closed off here, the one rule of this server that hasn't been broken and flaunted in front of everyone's faces. The one rule that might actually sort of mean something. But evidently it doesn't mean enough, because Phil and Techno not only found the stronghold, but decided to use it for a *secret anarchy base*.

When he voices all of this aloud, Phil just shrugs.

"Techno won me over to the whole anarchy thing, a bit," he says, completely unrepentant. "We wanted a base, and the stronghold was literally right there. Not like anyone else was using it."

"I really feel like that's not the point," Ranboo says weakly. He understands the significance, apparently. "Phil, even I know what a stronghold is."

"Okay, it's not nearly as big of a deal as you two are making it out to be," Phil says, even though he is wrong, completely dead-wrong. "Just, c'mon, I'll show you how we get there." He starts walking, heading for the door, and he and Ranboo are given no choice but to follow. "We found an old library in it, lots of books in surprisingly good condition, considering. I haven't even begun to go through them all. I'm thinking if it's information on ancient, slightly eldritch beings we're looking for, that's our best bet in finding anything."

"Right," he says. "Sure. Why not?" He hopes Phil can hear the utter frustration in his voice. The smirk directed his way tells him that Phil did, indeed, hear it. Bastard.

But there's nothing to do but go with him, at this point. It's not like he's going to pass up the chance to see one of these; he's been in strongholds before, of course, but this feels like it holds more significance, somehow, on a server where the End is forbidden to all. Phil leads them through a convoluted series of passages, hitting buttons that reveal secret doors, and

there's a long hallway of ice, and then more buttons, and the air gets cooler and cooler, musty and still. Old. Tense. Like the rock itself is waiting.

And then, Phil opens up one final door, and a different hallway greets them. One crafted with intent, not carved carelessly out of stone. Bricks placed purposefully, rough though the detailing now is, and the air is stale here, and strangely damp. They're underwater, then, and he casts Phil a glance. He seems unconcerned, and Wilbur chooses to believe that means that the roof won't cave in under the pressure of the ocean above.

"I don't think I've ever been in one of these," Ranboo says. His voice is hushed, quiet, almost awestruck.

"It's not much," Phil says with a shrug. "Normally wouldn't bother with it, in a server like this, but like I said, Techno and I wanted a base, and it happened to be close. Not much of use here, but there is a library. More cobwebs than books by now, but a lot of what's left seems legible, at least. I haven't gone through most of it. Here, this way."

Phil keeps walking, and for a moment, Ranboo doesn't follow. He looks a bit taken aback, perhaps by Phil's casual attitude toward a place that in any other circumstance, to any other person, might be something approaching sacred.

Wilbur sighs.

"Phil's just like that," he murmurs. "Plus, he's been on dozens of servers. Seen dozens of these. And he's ancient, too, so there's that." He goes along after Phil, and Ranboo, after a second of hesitation, hurries to catch up with him.

"How ancient are we talking here?" he asks.

Wilbur feels his lips twitch upward. "Do you know, I don't think I've ever actually asked for the exact number," he says. "Centuries, at least. Maybe a few millennia. No one really quite knows what Phil is. I'm not sure he knows himself." He shrugs. "Growing up, he was always just our dad. That was enough."

"Oh." Ranboo chews on that for a moment, and then nods. "Okay then. That actually explains a couple of things."

He hums. "How did you come to live by him, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Oh, well, it was after—you know about Doomsday, right? I mean—"

(destruction raining from the sky and the terrifying shriek of withers and his home is gone the history is gone and Friend, Friend is gone, his dearest Friend and Phil knew, he knew, he knew and he did it anyway but only a few minutes later the memory is gone because he does not want to remember this and it is a blessing, being able to forget, because what use is carrying pain that he can do nothing about, what use is holding it close and letting it make a monster of him because even dead he cannot manage to ask for help must keep up the facade but at least let it be a happy one)

(and yet looking back on it, looking back on it now, he feels barely any anger at all. like son, like father, after all)

He smiles tightly. “I know about Doomsday,” he agrees, and then tilts his head. “That’s right, you were—you were living in L’Manberg at the time, weren’t you? I—Ghostbur saw you there.”

“Yeah, I lived there,” Ranboo says. “Right up until it turned into a crater, I guess. But, um, after all of that, Phil knew that I didn’t have anywhere to go, so—I don’t know, I guess he felt bad for me or something? He invited me to stay up here with him and Techno, and I guess I never really left.”

That’s such a uniquely Phil thing to do. Destroy a country, then pick up one of the kids he rendered homeless. Wilbur can imagine exactly how that went.

“Well, I hope you know that you’re not likely to be rid of him now,” he says, and then the two of them step around the corner, and right across the way, there is an open doorway, and even from here, he can see the rows upon rows of bookshelves, some of them half-empty and all of them covered in cobwebs and a thick layer of dust. He glances at Ranboo one last time, and then the two of them step into the room.

He is not one for claustrophobia,

(was not, though now tight spaces and dark rooms remind him of one place and one place only)

but the room feels close, crowded, the shelves towering over him, and even over Ranboo, who has more than a foot of height on him, tall and lanky and half-ender as he is. And more than that, the room feels old, feels weighty, moreso even than the rest of the stronghold, because here are books that must have been written hundreds of years ago, before the server passed into Dream’s hands, that have not been touched since, that have been left to gather dust and mold in an ancient ruin under the sea. In these books are the words of people who came years before him, their words reaching out to grasp the long arm of the future, and it is nothing that he has not seen before, but he never gets used to it. He is no scholar, really, no Technoblade, but he can appreciate this for what it is, can appreciate the history here, the circle that never ends.

(he has always fancied himself as part of a story, has always been able to look outside of himself to see what role the history books will have him play. moments like this only make him more aware of it, more aware that someday, he will be long in the ground and only his words will live on, his words and the words of others, a legacy, a garden growing and fed on the dust that was once him)

(it should already be so. stories are not supposed to be picked up after the last thread is snapped and yet here he is, and the whole narrative has been thrown into disarray)

Phil’s head peers out around one of the shelves.

“Took you long enough,” he says. “We can start anywhere, I suppose. I didn’t get around to cataloging any of this shit, so your guess is as good as mine as to where the important stuff is.”

“Great,” Ranboo says, sounding thoroughly unenthusiastic. “I love having absolutely no idea what we’re looking for.”

“We have to start somewhere,” he says, though looking at the shelves around them, he thinks that Ranboo might have a point. But nonetheless, he grabs a random book off the nearest shelf and opens it, frowning at the mold that dots the pages. But as Phil said, it’s legible, and his eyes scan over faded words, printed in an older dialect that’s just barely understandable.

They split up, each taking a different section. But it only takes a few hours for Wilbur to get frustrated. He’s more patient than this, normally, unless that’s another aspect of himself that he lost somewhere along the line. But he thinks he’s justified—perhaps under normal circumstances, they would have all the time in the world to find the information they need. In normal circumstances, a strategy like this would work. But they don’t have that kind of time. And they especially don’t have that kind of time to search for knowledge that may not even be here at all.

He snaps the book he’s leafing through shut and stands.

“I’m stretching my legs,” he calls, and doesn’t wait for an answer before striding out of the room. Too late, he remembers that they’re still underground, underwater, and the air outside of the library is barely any fresher than the air inside, which does not improve his mood. But a walk might help clear his head, so a walk is what he takes, wandering the corridors as he did in the castle earlier, that same restlessness returning.

It all comes down to a feeling of helplessness, in the end, of powerlessness. He was powerless to stop the Egg. Powerless to save Techno, and then later, powerless to help him. And he is powerless now, skimming through century-old books with barely a hope of a payoff. And yet, it’s all he can do, is the best plan they have, and how is it possible that *this* is the best plan they have?

He used to be good at this. He has been presenting himself as good at this, pulled on his old general’s strength to present confidence to the others, surety. And yet, here they are, and it’s too soon to give up, he knows, but it’s been a few hours and they have found nothing, and he can’t help but feel like they’re going to continue to find nothing.

You are nothing, and you may as well give it up, give in, throw away yourself for a chance of saving what little you have not already lost, something whispers, and it is not him, and there is translucent red lining the edges of his vision, for if you pass up this chance, who do you have to blame but yourself?

“Shut up,” he mutters. “Shut the fuck up. You’re thousands of chunks away, shut *up*.”

Distance is no matter to one such as I, and you ought to know better than to hope for it, it says. You ought to know better than to hope for a great many things. Powerless as you are, why not take into your hands the only choice you have left to you, take back your peace and

save your brother, save them all from the encroaching choke, save them all and yourself most of—

He steps into another room, and the voice abruptly stops, leaving his head blessedly silent. He catches himself holding his breath, and he releases it all at once.

And then realizes what he's seeing. It's a meeting room, clearly, decorated far beyond what an untouched stronghold would look like, and this has Phil's interior design choices stamped all over it, but—

They're using the End Portal as a table.

Because that is undoubtedly the End Portal. Even if he hadn't seen one before, once or twice, on different servers, he would be able to recognize the blocks for what they are: something other, something that belongs to a different place entirely. They fill the room with a low, buzzing hum, and underneath that, there is a melody hovering just beyond his perception, a melody that he doesn't think he's ever heard before. He hums, trying to match the notes, and finds that he can't, that he always lands above or below no matter what pitch he vocalizes. And yet, even still, there is something about it that is eerily comforting.

Perhaps it is simply the way the Egg fell silent as soon as he stepped inside. He appreciates that.

But still. They're using it as a *table*.

"Do you like the décor?" Phil asks, amusement clear in his tone. Wilbur doesn't turn to look at him, but Phil comes up beside him soon enough, and Ranboo trails behind, staring at the portal with wide eyes.

"Is nothing sacred to you?" he asks, and the teasing note comes out naturally.

"Eh," Phil says, shoulders lifting in a shrug. "You know how it is."

"I know what that is," Ranboo says, sounding far, far away. "I know—I know this, I—why do I—?"

(a question: if he could sense the music, human and just barely void-touched as he is, then what must it sound like to one who has the End itself in his veins?)

Ranboo takes one step forward, and then another, until he's standing right next to the portal-table. One hand hovers above it, and he hesitates before placing it down. Wilbur glances to Phil, wondering if this is a thing they should be stopping, but Phil is staring at Ranboo, head tilted and eyes slightly narrow.

"Have you never seen one of these before?" he asks.

"I don't know," Ranboo says, still distant. "Maybe? I don't think I remember. But I—I don't know where I come from, but this feels like—"

“Well, it is an End Portal,” Phil agrees. “I wasn’t sure if it was still functional, but I guess that answers that question. You’re probably sensing something from it that we’re not picking up on, with you being half-ender and all.”

“I guess—”

“Why wouldn’t it be functional?” Wilbur interrupts. Maybe that’s not what he should’ve gotten out of that, but he’s satisfied that this is an enderman thing, not something to be concerned over. But that offhand remark, said in that infuriatingly casual way that Phil so often has, draws his attention, because he’s never heard of a non-functional End Portal before. He didn’t think that such a thing was possible; everyone knows that portals are the one sure fixture of almost every server, unable to be tampered with or destroyed by any means.

“Oh, that.” Phil laughs. “There’s an interesting story there, actually. When Techno and I first came through here, we—”

But Phil gets cut off.

Wilbur senses it before he sees that anything is changed: the pressure in the room shifts, suddenly, becoming greater, more. All the hair on the back of his neck stands on end, and the next breath he takes, he gets a lungful of ozone, sharp and electric. He coughs, and finds that the noise falls strangely flat, and then there is someone hovering over the portal-table. Not standing. Hovering, a good six inches from the table’s surface.

Ranboo stumbles back, and Phil takes several strides forward, arms outstretched as if to shield them both. His cloak twitches, though his wings do not spread.

Wilbur’s not sure what he’s looking at.

They are a person, he thinks. At least, they are person-shaped, though it is somewhat difficult to tell; most of their body is covered in a long green cloak, one that drifts around them despite the stillness of the air. They have no visible feet, and their hands are hidden, if they have them. But under their hood, there is nothing but shadows, and those shadows do not seem to fall across a face. Instead, it is as though they are made of void, black and cold, and he finds himself leaning in, straining to see if there is anything past that, and the hood twitches in his direction and he gets a glimpse of

(twin halos circling circling like a tear in the world and a tear in the void a tear in the nothing and the everything and a circle half filled in and half open and you know something in you knows)

He freezes. His spine locks up. They do not have eyes but they are looking at him, and the only way to describe the feeling is prey studied by a predator. The Egg didn’t make him feel like this. Even Dream didn’t make him feel like this.

(or he did, but it was tainted by darkness, tainted by corruption, a predator studying prey if the predator was malicious rather than just an animal, acting on cruel whim rather than nature and instinct. this is something different. this is something vaster. this is the regard of a)

“The End is closed,” the newcomer says, and Wilbur stiffens further, because their voice echoes and vibrates and buzzes in his skull, but underneath that, underneath all the white noise, the voice sounds like Dream. But that cannot possibly be right. This—*person*, whatever they are, they are not human, but they are not the same as Dream, do not give off the same impression of oozing corruption, of a black pit at the core, sucking in all light to be snuffed out, stamped upon.

“We weren’t going to the End, mate,” Phil says, calm. “Just talking. Not against the rules to talk, is it?”

“The End is closed,” they repeat, their voice grating and twisting and pulling at the reality around them. Wilbur feels a headache begin to form behind his eyes, a dull throbbing.

“Right, one trick pony, you are,” Phil mutters, and then glances over his shoulder. “This is what I was about to tell you about. Seems there’s someone to enforce the End rule here. They almost took away the portal entirely before Techno and I swore we weren’t gonna use it. Nothing much to worry about, I don’t think. Look,” he tacks on, turning back to them, “we were really just having a chat. Don’t need someone looking over our shoulders for it.”

The hood of the cloak moves again in what might, possibly, be considered a head tilt.

“You may not open the way to the End,” they say. “Not even for his sake.” A hand snakes out of the folds of the cloak, gloved in black, and makes a quick gesture in Ranboo’s direction. Wilbur blinks, hard; the motion is difficult to track, and it’s as if they slice open the very air itself just by moving.

Phil scoffs. “Is that what this is about?” he asks. “Mate. He’s an enderman hybrid, he can’t help but be drawn to it. But he’s not stupid enough to try and go through. You’re not needed here. Promise.”

Ranboo nods in agreement, head bobbing rapidly as he makes a few noises of agreement. Wilbur might be amused by it, if it weren’t for the fact that every inch of his skin feels like a live wire, being in the same room as this thing. He’s not sure why Phil is being so nonchalant about this, as if this is normal. This isn’t normal. Or perhaps he’s the strange one, is overreacting to something that is undoubtedly odd but no reason to worry, but he doesn’t think so. He really, really doesn’t think so.

They drift a few inches back, almost absently.

“He watches from behind your eyes,” they say. “He above all others must not be allowed access. You will forgive my insistence.”

“The fuck does that mean?” Phil asks, and Wilbur wants to echo his confusion, except the Egg was in his head not even ten minutes ago, and he has a sneaking suspicion as to what they might be referring to. The Egg was in his head, but they are not looking at him, he’s sure, because when they were looking at him, he could feel it, just as he could feel Dream’s gaze sliding across him like the touch of a razor and yet not like that at all. And Ranboo has tensed, so perhaps this is directed at him, but Wilbur pushes that aside and steps forward,

evading Phil's outstretched arm, because if no one else is going to ask the questions he wants answered, then he will.

"What the fuck are you?" he says, blunt. Perhaps it's not the wisest move, but he's tired and irritated, and when Phil goes to grab his shoulder, he shrugs him off. "No, I'm not—*stop* that, I'm done with things yanking on my chain. This guy wants to appear in front of us and be all cryptic and shit, I'm not having that. Not today. We don't have time for this. So what the fuck are you?"

For a moment, they go silent. His breathing is loud in his own ears.

(he's not sure why he's stuck on this, not sure why he's stuck on them, for he has tangled with gods and monsters and this being should be no different, really, from what he has dealt with over the past few weeks, should be better, even, since it seems that they are not here to try to kill him or his family, but he looks at them and sees beyond them, sees a break in the world and crack in the code and it is like and not like anything else he has seen before and perhaps they will not find what they need to know in books)

"I am the protector," they say at length. "A fragment and a failsafe."

"I didn't ask what you do," he says, "I asked what you are."

"Wil—"

"*Stop*," he insists. He's standing in front of both of them now, and he doesn't look back, doesn't take his eyes off the figure floating over the table. "We've got some, some otherworldly being in here with us, and you don't think this could at all be relevant? Please tell me I'm not the only one who realizes who he sounds like." Without waiting for an answer, he addresses the being again. "What are you? And how are you connected to Dream? You can't tell me you're not, I don't believe it."

Behind him, Ranboo makes a little sound, like he's been punched in the gut.

They are silent once again.

And then:

"I am a shadow," they say. "A shadow of the original. I am what he rejected in his last moment of clarity."

"What are you—are you trying to say you know Dream? Or that you *came* from Dream?"

They drift closer. "I am of him but not him. My task is to prevent the worst. The final task he set me. I can do nothing else."

"Is the 'he' in that sentence Dream?" Ranboo asks, a frantic whisper that is very loud. "Is the—I don't like this, I don't like this at all. Can we go now? I think we should go now and leave the mysterious floating guy alone."

“Could you speak in anything but riddles?” he snaps, ignoring him. “I want a straight answer. You haven’t given me one yet.”

They drift closer still, and his skin erupts in gooseflesh, static energy crackling across it. He resists the urge to step back.

(this reminds you of another time another time long ago and this surge of confidence is true truer than any you have experienced yet since they dragged you back into this world by your trailing fingertips and it is true because you remember standing on the walls and facing the ruler of the server and holding your ground for what you believe in for the people you fight for and this is different but it feels the same feels the same and you will not give in not even to a)

They are looking at him, right at him,

(twin halos circle slashing wounds into the world and this is something that was never meant to be)

and they say, “It is not of you to demand of me. I am the protector. That is my task,” but that is not what Wilbur hears, because suddenly, there is something in his head, something poking at his thoughts, but it does not reach in as the Egg did, does not pull at the threads of his mind and attempt to twist them into something new, but rather just exists on the edges, touching but not pressing, and there is a pressure and he doesn’t like it at all but it doesn’t hurt him.

And what they say is not words, but rather impressions, imparted to him all at once, impossible to pick apart, and

(the beginning and the end all wrapped up in one as the universe looks on and this server is a home he will make it a home he did but he is gone and this is what remains of the divine fabric the crown of the world and they wait and wait and the universe looks on and they are nothing but a shell all the love taken by the other and broken corrupted drowned twisted and they wait by their task they do what has been set and only once do they not only once do they act there is a man and he asks and he is cloaked by the universe and the thrall of the empty and time in its mercilessness and that which is inbetween and he asks and the universe says yes so they do not refuse and they drag you back into this world by your trailing fingertips for the better or for the worse and the man is gone and the universe cannot be contained by this but the universe says)

he doesn’t understand a bit of it, but he reels back regardless, and his head feels like fireworks have gone off within it, like a thousand thunderclaps sounding overhead. Hands land on his shoulder, on his arm, and he does not push Phil away this time, nor Ranboo when he suddenly appears on his other side. He blinks the spots from his vision, and looks up. The figure is gone.

“You alright?” Phil asks quietly.

“What the fuck?” he says instead of replying. “Phil, what—what was that?”

“I second that? I would also like to know?” Ranboo says, voice tilting upward.

“I would’ve told you not to mess with them, but I figured you should get it out of your system,” Phil says, still quiet, deadly serious. He stares at the table rather than make eye contact, and Wilbur follows his gaze. The End Portal still hums. “I’ve been around the block enough to know a god when I see one. I don’t know what the fuck this one is or what connection they have to Dream, but all they seem to want to do is make sure that no one goes to the End. Like I said, that’s what I was about to tell you before they showed up. Techno and I had to swear five times over that we wouldn’t use the portal for anything other than decoration before they’d even let us keep it. I figured it was best to leave them the fuck alone.”

“A god?” Ranboo echoes. “Like, an actual god? Divine smiting and all of that?”

Wilbur has never been much of a believer himself. Or at least, not one for worship. Gods may exist, but he’ll pay one homage when he decides it deserves his respect, and that day has never arrived.

But this one

(was in his head and he wanted it gone wanted it gone because he has had enough of things dragging their fingers across his sense of self but this one did not push and more than that it felt familiar almost like)

is important.

“There’s plenty of different kinds of gods,” Phil says, “but essentially, yes.”

“Dream’s not a god, though,” he states flatly. Phil glances at him.

“He’s never felt like one to me,” he agrees. “But I never picked up on the demon thing either, so I probably know fuck-all.”

“This feels important,” he says, and runs his fingers through his hair, trying to settle his nerves. “This feels—fuck, every time I think I’ve got all the pieces laid out, it turns out that I’ve made the framework too short, and there’s components I didn’t even know existed.” He shakes his head. The headache has mostly abated, so that’s something. “I don’t suppose they’d come back if we asked them nicely?”

“Do we want them to come back?” Ranboo asks, his voice rising in pitch even further. “Is that a thing that we want?”

He runs a hand through his hair again and doesn’t reply. Phil doesn’t either, though he’s not sure it’s for the same reason. Because frankly, yes; he wants them to come back. He asked them questions and didn’t understand a word of their answers, and he feels like he’s barely scraped the surface of what’s actually going on here. But one thing has been made clear enough: the nature of the connection between Dream and this being, this *god*, is uncertain, but the connection exists. And considering everything, that is something that’s relevant to them.

He's beginning to think that they might get some information out of this after all. But he doubts that it'll come from any book.

They don't find anything. They go at it for another few hours, flipping through musty pages until his eyes swim, and they come up with absolutely jack-shit. He wishes he could say that he's surprised. He decides not to say anything about it at all, because Ranboo is wavering on his feet and Phil's face is held in tight lines, and his negativity won't do either of them any good.

"We can try again tomorrow," Phil says, "but we need to turn it in. It's been a long fucking day."

It doesn't feel like it's been one day. Doesn't feel like just this morning, they were marching into the Egg's chamber, intent on taking it down once and for all. Doesn't feel like they were chased out less than an hour later, battered and with one less than they started with, Dream escaped and everything gone to shit. It doesn't feel like one day, and yet, it has been, and it reminds him of the war, at the end, when everything was happening so quickly and there was barely any time to process one event before something else was going wrong.

He doesn't miss those days.

"How long can we afford to do this, Phil?" he asks, and doesn't bother to hide his weariness. "How long can we afford to fuck around out here with nothing to show for it? We can't even be sure that nothing's happened in the Greater SMP, not with comms down."

"I wish I had a good answer to that, Wil," Phil says. "I really do. If you've got a better plan, I'm all ears."

He

(does, perhaps, but it's not one that Phil will like)

doesn't, so the rest of the walk back out of the stronghold is made in silence. It's a relief when they make it to the surface, the cold, biting air fresh on his face. He turns his face into the wind just to feel it, regardless of the sting. Night has fallen, the sun just the barest hint of purple-orange on the western horizon. Overhead, stars twinkle, bright and distant. Techno's house is lit, now, an orange glow emanating from the windows. Tommy must have gotten a fire going.

Tommy. Right. They've left Tommy alone with Techno all afternoon. He's too tired to be concerned about it right now. The house isn't burning down, so they're probably fine.

"I think I'm gonna go home for the night, if that's okay," Ranboo says. "I'll meet up with you guys again in the morning?"

“Sounds good, mate,” Phil says, a bit distractedly; his eyes are roving over the cottage, probably searching for signs of property damage. But Ranboo takes it for agreement, so the kid nods, and then waves awkwardly to him, and then he’s walking across the snow toward the nearest mountain. For the first time, Wilbur realizes that there appears to be a house built into its side, not particularly pretty, but functional.

“With luck, they’re both conked out,” Phil mutters. He gathers his robes around him and heads for the door, and Wilbur trails after him.

Phil opens the door, and they’re greeted with silence. It is not the same silence from before; a fire crackles merrily in the hearth, now, some evidence of life. The house no longer gives an impression of a grave. But there are no voices that he can hear, nothing from the house’s two inhabitants, and perhaps Phil is right and they’re both asleep, but Wilbur doesn’t trust silence.

So as Phil goes over to the fire to stir up the coals, he makes a beeline for the ladder, climbing up as quietly as the creaky old thing will allow. The muttering hits his ears as soon as he pokes his head above the floor, hushed and furious, as if they both want to be shouting but are held back by some unspoken rule, some agreement not to break the peace of the rest of their surroundings. Or maybe that’s bullshit; Tommy isn’t one to care about things like that, after all.

He doesn’t step off the ladder, choosing to hang there for a moment instead, gripping the rungs uneasily. The wood is rough, and vaguely, he wonders if he’ll get splinters.

Technoblade is awake, and more than that, he is aware. That is the first thing his mind locks onto, the fact that his brother looks far better than he did earlier. He is still shaking, but far less, and his eyes are bright and present rather than fogged with pain. He sees no sign of gold, no lingering flickers and flashes of magic, and the relief is heady. He is not yet completely well; the fact that he is still in bed is evidence enough of that. But he is sitting up, and he no longer looks like death warmed over,

(too soon too soon)

and his face is twisted in irritation rather than pain.

Tommy has scooted his emerald block closer to the bed, is leaning forward, feet planted on the floor and hands planted on his knees, all bristling anger, indignation, face flushed and red. He puts Wilbur in mind of a cat, hissing and spitting at the object of his ire, making himself bigger than he truly is.

“—the fuck you *want*,” he’s saying, and his whisper is harsh, but it’s certainly a whisper. “I don’t fucking—I don’t owe you shit, you got that? I don’t owe you shit, so you can, you can fuck right off, you hear me?”

Techno blinks. “When did I say that, Tommy? Please tell me exactly when I said that,” he says, and—oh. Wilbur gets it now. Because Techno’s voice is quiet and rough, still thick with exhaustion, and he’s probably only a few minutes out from waking up. So, Tommy may be angry, may be positively irate, but whether he’s aware of it or not, he’s holding himself back,

refusing to unleash the full force of his fury on someone who has objectively been through hell today.

(and Tommy is brash, and Tommy is loud, and Tommy performs being an irritating little shit like nobody's business, but above all else, Tommy is good, and Tommy will never admit it, but he is kind, and it is a miracle that it hasn't been beaten out of him along the way, that despite it all he has managed to keep his spirit, but he is kind, he is. and it is more despite him than because of him, but it is little moments like these that remind Wilbur why he is so proud of him)

"You don't have to say it," Tommy bites out. "Mister, mister violence is the only language or whatever the hell, mister vengeance, you're big on favors and repaying them. But I—I didn't ask you to do shit, you did that all on your own, so I don't owe you. I'm saying it right now, I don't owe you."

There is an edge to the words. A fear. An expectation. Wilbur doesn't expect it to hit him as hard as it does, but there is a pang in his chest, and he wonders if this is yet another lesson he imparted on his little brother. To expect no kindness without an ulterior motive.

(that was how he was, in the darkness of the ravine, seeking out the duplicity of everyone around him, even when there was none to be found, but it is one thing to look back and see clearly, now, what he was like, the slope he slid down, the spiral he entered, and another to continue to be confronted with the evidence of the hurt he caused, the hurt he has yet to truly make up for)

(here is a certainty that has not left him: he does not deserve Tommy's forgiveness. that is another thing that can be attributed to his kindness. the kindness that somehow, between the wars and the country and the shadows, he did not manage to take from him, not like he took so much else)

"I didn't do it so that you'd owe me," Techno says. "Give me a little more credit than that."

"Why should I?" Tommy erupts, though it is the quietest eruption that Wilbur has ever heard from him. "Why—give me one fucking reason why I should believe a word out of your mouth."

"I don't lie," Techno states, flat. "I have no reason to."

"Oh, right," Tommy says, "because you're so fucking honorable. You're so fucking—I can't deal with you, you know that? You're a fucking hypocrite, and I don't care what your game is. I don't *care*. You're the worst, and I—"

"I don't want you dead," Techno says. "That's it. That's why I did it, Tommy, simple as that."

"*Bullshit*," Tommy snaps. "Then what the fuck was Doomsday, then? What the fuck was telling me to die like a hero, then? You are just talking complete shit, shit out of your mouth, out of your arse—"

And then, Tommy, cuts off, because Techno tenses, seizing up, a sudden glimmer of gold in his eyes, and he grunts, hands curling into his bed sheets, his face blanking. Tommy moves forward, seemingly on instinct, hands reaching out to steady him, and there is again, that kindness, that kindness that Tommy would rather die than allow anyone to point out.

The fit subsides, Techno breathing heavily. Tommy lingers for a moment, and then jerks back, scowling, as soon as Techno makes eye contact with him.

“Fuck off,” he mutters.

“At the end of the day,” Techno says, slowly, “it doesn’t really matter whether you believe me or not. I’ve been angry at you, Tommy. I can’t say that I don’t feel like it was justified. I’m sick of—” He closes his eyes, inhaling sharply, and then opens them again. “I’ve said all this before. It doesn’t matter. But I don’t want you dead, and I wasn’t about to let Dream kill you in front of me when I could do somethin’ about it. Between my first life and your third one, it was an easy choice.” He sighs, settling further down on the pillows. “Take it or leave it. I’m not arguin’ this right now.”

Tommy’s mouth works. Several emotions flicker across his face, and Wilbur can only pick out a few of them: disbelief, more anger, but perhaps something that might be hope. Perhaps. But if it is, he doesn’t get the chance to find out, because at that moment, Phil calls up from the base of the ladder.

“Everything okay?” he asks, and that’s right, he’s just been standing here, on the ladder, for the past few minutes. He can see why that would make Phil concerned. But that means that Tommy and Techno are both suddenly made aware of his presence.

“What—how long have you been there?” Tommy sputters, and he shrugs, clambering up the last rung or two and stepping fully into the room.

“Not too long,” he says. “Glad to see you cognizant, Techno.”

It’s all he can think so say, really, though there are a plethora of other statements crowding his mind. That has always been a weakness of his, his inability to allow himself to be emotional when it really counts, his habit of hiding everything beneath layers of deflection and a cool exterior. He and Techno aren’t dissimilar on that front, though Techno has a different way of going about it.

(so here is what he does not say: *I’m so glad you’re alright, I saw you die when you’re supposed to be deathless and it terrified me, please never do that again, I know we’re broken and fucked up and maybe we’ll never be what we once were but I can’t imagine a life knowing that you won’t be there when I need you to be, so please, please stay alive*)

“Can’t say I’m having a great time with it,” Techno mutters, and he’s definitely falling asleep again. “But thanks. Glad you’re not dead too, Wilbur.”

The ladder creaks again as Phil comes up, and he pauses a moment to survey the room before stepping in, eyebrows raising as he takes in the scene.

“Nobody bleeding or dying?” he asks wryly, and then crosses the floor to perch on the edge of Techno’s bed. “Hey, Tech, how you feeling?”

“Absolutely fantastic,” Techno says. “Top form, point me at the orphans.”

Phil laughs, more relief than anything else, and smooths some of Techno’s hair away from his face. Techno huffs out a sigh, but allows the gesture.

“Great,” Tommy says. “You all get anything, or was this whole thing for nothing?” There’s more hostility in his voice than necessary, though whether it’s genuine or to cover for his earlier emotion, Wilbur can’t tell.

“Nothing yet,” Phil says, unfazed. “We’ll spend the night here, get back at it in the morning. If we still don’t find shit, we’ll discuss where to go from there.”

Tommy crosses his arms, looking away, and he’s displeased at the concept of staying here, Wilbur can tell. So as Phil continues to lean over Techno, he slides over to him, nudging him in the arm. Tommy flinches, and then relaxes, eyeing him up.

“You good?” he murmurs, keeping his voice down.

“Fine,” Tommy replies. “Are we actually going to get anything out of this, or was this a big fucking waste of our time?”

Again, vitriol, and he remembers the conversation between him and Tubbo, overheard and unmentioned. After everything they’ve been through, a separation can’t be easy. On either of them, but especially on Tommy.

(a memory: buzzing excitement at doing something good, at helping, shining compasses, an inscription: *Your Tubbo*)

“It won’t be a waste of time,” he says, and the plan that’s been formulating in the back of his mind solidifies. It’s not a very good plan. But it’s something, and it’s more than they’ve got. “I’ll make sure of that.”

It is a general’s responsibility to lead his soldiers to victory, after all. And in the case of a half-baked, reckless plan, to take matters into his own hands.

And it is more than the general’s responsibility. It is his. For better, or for worse.

Chapter End Notes

So obviously, I'm also not going with established canon for DreamXD, either. XD's role in this fic was one of the things that I had planned out from the very beginning, before he started to get any kind of character development in canon, so I'm not using the canonical lore that we've gotten for him. What exactly his role *is* in this fic should

become more clear next chapter, but I'd love to hear your theories based on the hints I dropped in this one :D

As always, thank you all so much for your support! If you enjoyed, feel free to leave a comment or some kudos, as I thrive on feedback, and my tumblr is [here](#) if you want to stop by!

Next up, Chapter Fifteen: In which Wilbur deals with an unwanted visitor, and then enacts his plan, which basically consists of Going to Yell at God.

(and the universe said)

Chapter Notes

Bruh. Thank you all so much for 1,000 kudos, holy shit!!!

Chapter content warnings include swearing, manipulation, (imagined) spiders, mentioned blood, nausea, referenced character death, and slight suicidal ideation.

Chapter title is, as always, from 'Soldier' by Fleurie... wait, no? It isn't? Huh. Funny, that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He waits until they are all asleep, until Techno has slid back into unconsciousness and Tommy is curled around the pillows in the guest bedroom and Phil has finally given into exhaustion, his wings shadowy, misshapen lumps in the gloom. Wilbur slips right out from under their noses, and while fatigue pulls at his limbs, makes him clumsier, louder than he would be otherwise, the rest of them are far too tired to wake up. He would be too, if his mind would allow him to rest.

But not tonight.

His plan is not a smart one. He's aware of that much, at least. But it is a plan, and it has marginally better chances of success, he thinks, than trawling through old books and hoping that one of them will happen to have the answers that they need. He was foolish to think it might work in the first place; even if it did, they don't have time for it. He's sure of that much. Every second they delay is another second in which Dream and the Egg can plan, can plot, can accumulate power, and while provoking a god might not be the best idea in the world, it's sure to produce some sort of result.

That's what they need. Results.

He sticks close to the walls and the furniture so that the floors don't creak, and he takes a moment to ease open a few of Techno's chests, rooting through them until he finds an old crossbow, dinged up but still serviceable. Between this and the bow that Tubbo gave him, the bow that's been sitting in his inventory all but unused, he feels well-equipped, and he's sure Techno won't notice its disappearance.

He crosses to the front door, grips the handle, and:

“Going out for a stroll?”

He wheels around, pulls the crossbow from his inventory and into his hand, and fires in the same motion. The figure ducks, and the arrow goes whizzing over his head, burying itself in

the back wall. Then, they straighten, and though the room is covered in shadows, the light from the moon outside gleams on the white of the mask.

“That wasn’t very nice of you,” Dream chides.

“How the fuck did you get in here?” he growls. “How the fuck did you know where we were?” He hopes Dream doesn’t pick up on the fact that he’s terrified. Not so much for himself, but Tommy is right upstairs,

(and he’ll die before he lets Dream touch Tommy again, except Technoblade already did that, and he’s sure Dream planned it that way, planned for Tommy to blame himself for the suffering that Dream caused)

sound asleep, and he needs to keep it that way. Can’t allow Dream anywhere near his brother, can’t give the bastard the chance to do any more harm.

Dream shrugs. “I have my ways,” he says. “I have eyes and ears everywhere. And I feel like you all like to forget that I’m an admin. This server is mine, and now that I’m out of the prison, I have infinite power at my fingertips. I guess I get why you guys fight. You’re all pretty stubborn like that. But there’s no question as to who holds all the cards, here.”

He grits his teeth.

“What do you want?” he whispers.

Dream laughs, short and chilling, and with that, his presence fills the room, spreading out from him like an oil slick, or a pool of thick blood, covering the floor, the walls, and creeping up and onto him. It feels like spiders crawling across his skin, thousands of them, on him and in him and trying to work their way inside, in his mouth and up his nose and under his fingernails, and he breathes sharply to convince himself that the sensation is imagined. He wants to scrape at himself, scratch until the feeling goes away, but instead, he plants his feet, levels his crossbow.

(aim true aim true you always were best when raising your bow in defense of others)

“No need for that,” Dream insists, raising both his hands in a mockery of a peace gesture. “I just want to talk to you, Wilbur.”

“Is that so?” He doesn’t waver in his aim.

“You’re an interesting person,” Dream says. “I thought I had you figured, but now, I’m not so sure.” He tilts his head up, and Wilbur catches a glimpse of his lips, curling upward into a slight smile. “I like you, Wilbur. I’d like to understand you.”

“The feeling isn’t mutual,” he says. “I have nothing to say to you. Get the fuck out, or I’ll—”

“You’ll what,” Dream interrupts, “shoot me? I think you and I both know that won’t do anything. And then what will you do? Do you think you can stop me before I decide to go and say hi to whoever’s upstairs? Will they have time to wake up? I hear Technoblade’s in pretty rough shape, and I’m sure Tommy’s not doing too well. And then there’s Philza, and I

mean” —He makes a tsking sound with his teeth— “those wings of his looked pretty rough anyway, so maybe he wouldn’t even mind if I—”

(how does he know how does he know how does he know)

“Touch any of them, and there’s nothing in this world or any other that would stop me from killing you,” he says.

“You’re posturing,” Dream says easily. “That’s fine, I get it. I won’t do anything unless you force my hand. This doesn’t have to get ugly, not if you don’t push it.”

The threat is clear. He lowers the crossbow, but doesn’t dismiss it. Dream will have to be satisfied with that.

“Tit for tat,” he says, and scowls at the hoarseness of his voice. He doesn’t want Dream to know he’s gotten to him, but that’s now a lost cause. “I have questions for you.”

“Sure,” Dream says. “Here, I’ll even let you go first. Ask away.”

Fine. Fine, he can do this.

“What are you?” he says.

“A god, of course,” Dream says. “Come on, now, Wilbur, is that all you’ve got for me? I thought you were smarter than that. But it’s my turn now.” He takes a step forward, and it is all he can do to resist mirroring him, to avoid a retreat, no matter how small. “The Egg’s told me some things about you. How you let it in and then shook it off again. Congratulations on that, by the way. That’s not something that many people can do. But I know what it offered you. I know everything that it offered you. And the Wilbur Soot I know would have accepted several of those offers in a heartbeat. So, what’s holding you back?”

“Not wanting to be mind controlled by a fucking breakfast food is what’s holding me back,” he forces out. His hand clenches so hard around the crossbow’s handle that he hears wood creak.

“See, I don’t really believe that,” Dream says. “I remember you, Wilbur. I remember what you were like. Do you remember when I gave you all that TNT? Remember how happy you were to finally have such a force for destruction in your hands? Do you remember how excited you were to take yourself out with it? Do you remember that, Wilbur? I do. The Egg could give you either of those things, but you refused it. Are you trying to tell me that you don’t want any of that anymore?”

The feeling of spiders intensifies. It feels like they’re in his throat. He swallows, thickly. No spiders.

“Or is this about Tommy?” Dream continues. “I wouldn’t be surprised. It always seems to come back to Tommy.”

“It always seems to come back to Tommy because you make it come back to Tommy,” he snaps. “None of this would’ve happened if you’d just left him alone in the first place, you

dick, instead of deciding that your archenemy was a literal child.”

Dream hums. “I’m disappointed that you don’t see it,” he says. “I thought you of all people would know a thing or two about narrative foils. But we can come back to that. My next question—”

“No,” he says, and swallows again. His throat is so fucking dry. “No, it’s my turn. Tit for tat.”

Dream inclines his head. “Right, right. Go on.”

“When I asked what you were, that’s not what I meant, and you know it,” he says. “I don’t think you’re a god. Maybe you think you are, I don’t really know, but I don’t fucking care. Put your fucking god complex aside. I want to know what you are, specifically in relation to dreamons. And to the Egg. Actually, I’m rolling that in. You and the Egg, what connects you?”

Dream is silent for a moment. When he speaks, his voice is low, velvet.

“So, Tubbo told you about all of that, huh?” he says. He cocks his head, but otherwise, he is unnaturally still. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. He told you about the possession, then?”

“He did,” he says. “He said that he exorcised you. Did that actually work, or am I talking to something using Dream’s mouth?”

Another laugh. This one softer. Almost genuinely amused. “That’s another question. But sure, I’ll allow it. I might as well explain it to you,” Dream says. “No, the exorcism worked. It’s just me in here. But like I said, stuff like that is a tricky business, y’know?” And then, to Wilbur’s annoyance, the man starts prowling, walking circles around him. His footfalls are so light as to be inaudible, and Wilbur twists himself in time with his steps, keeping him in view. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how it feels, to have something in your head, Wilbur. To have something else at the controls. To have to watch from a dark corner of your mind, screaming in horror as your body takes actions that aren’t yours. To be *helpless*.”

“You’re right, you don’t have to tell me,” he says, even if only to

(block out the red rising red rising he doesn’t want to think about it doesn’t want to fall like he knows he could knows he could play Icarus again)

disguise the way the words make him feel ill.

“Sure, sure,” Dream says. “So, that was that, and Tubbo and Fundy saved me from it. Have you talked to Fundy, by the way?”

“Not relevant,” he says.

Dream snorts, still circling, like he thinks he’s a shark or some shit, like he thinks that Wilbur will be intimidated by this blatant tactic. “Right,” he agrees, sarcasm dripping like dry wine. “So there I was, back in control. I’m never going to take that for granted again. But then, it turned out, things aren’t so simple as that. You can’t just say some magic words and hope that everything goes back to normal. That’s not how the world works.”

(that is a dig, definitely a dig, but he refuses to let it get to him, because he knows all too well the power of iron and steel, knows the language of violence is a universal one, but he gave up on his words, once, and look where that led him, and he has vowed to be better and that means trying to renew the faith that he tossed away, the faith in words and the power of his pen, and disillusioned as he may now be, he has to let himself think that his younger self was not entirely wrong to believe)

“The dreamon was gone,” Dream continues, “but it left bits of itself behind. Parts that got torn off in the violence of the exorcism. And those parts stayed with me. That darkness—it showed me things. Showed me the truth of what I was doing, and what I needed to be doing. The truth about power, attachment. I tried to resist it at first, but once I gave in, I’d never felt stronger. It’s part of me, now.” He grins. “Friends, family—in the end, that’s all worthless. Power has to come first, or the rest is useless. It’s a shame my original plan didn’t pan out, but this will work just as well. The people of this server will either unite under me and the Egg, or they’ll die. It’s that simple.”

“And the Egg?”

“A dreamon of the same kind,” Dream says. “It forced its way into the server centuries ago, maturing over years and years. It’s not really an Egg, of course. That’s just what your mind interprets it as, so you can comprehend it. But once it gathers enough strength, it’ll—hatch, so to speak. Your choices will be to join forces with it, or die and become the blood that feeds it. I’d prefer to have you with us. Killing you would be a waste, I really believe that.”

“Is that what you’re here for?” he asks. “Is this some kind of sales pitch?”

Dream stops walking. He’s between him and the door.

“Here’s my next question, Wilbur,” he says. “How did it feel, when you let the Egg have you?”

He stiffens. “What the fuck—”

“It’s an honest question,” Dream says. “I want to know.”

Spiders. Spiders in his mouth. Spiders and oil. His stomach rolls.

“It felt like shit,” he grits out.

“Did it?” Dream asks. “Did it, really? Think about it, Wilbur. I don’t want you lying to me.”

“I’m not lying,” he says, but almost unwillingly, his mind casts back to that moment, casts back to he and Tommy and Tubbo in that chamber, so sure that nothing could possibly go wrong, so sure that this was little more than a tourist stop for them.

And then, the Egg saw him, looked into his mind and saw something it could exploit. And it did.

(it reached in and twisted him, and it did not have to twist hard, not hard at all before he folded, not once but twice, first to the fire and the blood and second to his own destruction,

his own peace, and everything in him revolts against the sickly creeping red, like being drowned in syrup, and his stomach rolls again just thinking about it, and yet)

(and yet something in him still calls to it, he knows, calls for the fire and the blood and if not that than to the peace because even still, even *still*, he looks around him and cannot help but feel like his presence here does more harm than good, cannot help but believe that even though he is trying to shatter the archetype he consigned himself to, even though he made a promise, even though he wants to be better, it is all of no use because he penned the villain's role for himself once and now it is set in stone, and if he does not want to fall back into the threads of that storyline then his only choice is to remove himself from it utterly)

(his symphony is unfinished and it is supposed to remain so, and there is no poetry in a clumsy reentry)

“Aren't you?” Dream says.

(but remember this also, that there are threads tying you to this world and whether you like it or not you made a promise and you will keep it this time you will keep it so if you cannot live for your own sake then live for Tommy's do it for him do it so that the light in his eyes will no longer dim because of you you must try must keep trying for him if for no one else for everyone who loves you despite it all and most of all for him)

“No,” he says. He holds his ground, holds steady.

“Huh,” Dream says. “Well, alright, then. If you say so. But, Wilbur, and I'm just saying, but you should keep in mind what else it told you. What else it can give you.” Dream clasps his hands in front of him. “You should keep in mind that I like Tommy a lot. I'd rather keep Tommy around. But the Egg's not so fond of him, and I can't guarantee his life. The Egg's offered you his safety in exchange for your loyalty, and that's a two in one deal, right there. If protecting Tommy is one of the reasons you're making yourself stick around, I think you should consider taking it up on the offer. You'd get several things you want, then. You can be at peace, and you'll know that Tommy will be just fine.”

The words burn like acid in his throat.

“And what would that safety look like?” he asks. “Would you lock him in a cage? Or would you exile him again, Dream? I know what you did to him then. Ghostbur may have been naive, but I'm not.”

“It was a lesson,” Dream says idly, and in this moment, he wants nothing more to launch himself forward and wrap his fingers around his throat once again. “One that he still hasn't learned, I guess. But you shouldn't be so picky.” He pauses, and Wilbur can feel that oil-slick gaze on him, scorching him. “Between that and seeing him *dead*, which would you prefer? Because that's what's going to happen if you're not smart about this. Tommy, dead. The Egg wants his blood, and what the Egg wants, the Egg will have. I can't hold it off forever. It's not patient. Not like I am. Tommy will die if you keep this up, and the Egg will feed on him. Maybe more than once. I still have the revive book, after all, and the Egg might be able to persuade me to use it.”

He barely tamps down on his nausea.

He refuses to picture it.

(Tommy dead, blood in his hair, Tommy dead, eyes wide and unseeing, Tommy dead, and then Tommy alive, and dead again and alive and dragged back over and over again at the whim of a monster and no one there to save him no one there to protect him and no no no no no no *no no no*)

“You’re a sick bastard,” he croaks. “Get the fuck out.”

Dream shrugs again, and he hates it, hates that nothing he says seems to have any impact on him. “Think about it,” he says. “That’s all I ask. I’ll be seeing you soon, I’m sure. Give Tommy my love.”

That is the last straw. He brings his crossbow up again, but he’s a moment too slow, and the bolt zips through the space where Dream was a moment earlier, slamming against the door. Dream himself is gone. Teleported away, presumably, and he doesn’t know if that’s an admin thing or a demon thing or both, but it’s as infuriating as it is dangerous. He probably can’t even be sure that he’s really gone. Can Dream go invisible?

He doesn’t know.

It can’t matter. He can’t let this throw him. He has something to do tonight. So he lets himself have a minute, and he listens intently to the sound of the house, just in case the others were woken either by the conversation or by the sound of the bolts thunking into wood. But there is no sound, so he breathes in deeply, places the crossbow in his inventory, and gently pushes the door open. And then shuts it behind him.

He takes a single lantern with him; it does little to light the darkest hours of the night, but he doesn’t want to risk more illumination. He creeps through the snow like a ghost, and for a moment, he fancies that he is one,

(again, and Ghostbur always loved the snow, despite how it hurt him)

that he passes the world by and leaves no trace. At the very least, he is adept enough at sneaking that he doesn’t attract the attention of mobs, and by the time he finds the beginning of the passages that Phil took them through yesterday, he is colder but otherwise none the worse for wear.

The journey as a whole is without incident. It is simple to recall the way that Phil led them, where the buttons go and what needs to be opened up, and it is not long until the air turns musty, damp, old, and the rough stone of the passageways becomes more polished, more detailed.

He goes straight for the portal room.

The portal-table still hums, just as it did yesterday. It seems louder now. Perhaps because he is alone, and for the first time since he returned to life, no one knows where he is. He is

acting entirely of his own accord, and taking the impetus in this way is both satisfying and terrifying.

But he's here.

"Alright," he says to the empty room, "I know you can hear me. I want to talk to you."

He stops. Waits. Gets absolutely nothing. The hum remains constant, and the torches flicker in all the same patterns.

"Let me rephrase that," he says. "I'm going to talk to you, whether you like it or not. So you may as well come out and make it easier on both of us."

He pauses again. Still nothing. So he sighs.

"Alright, fine," he says, and strides forward, right up to the portal. He slaps his hands on the stones; they're warm, far warmer than they should be, and they vibrate slightly under his fingers. "Fine, you want to do this another way? That's alright by me." He runs his fingers along the frame. "It's a nice End Portal you've got here. If you won't come and talk, I might just decide to direct my attention elsewhere instead. Might go and get some Eyes of Ender, perhaps? I know how it's done. It's been quite some time since I went to an End dimension. I think I'd have fun with it."

No response comes, but the pressure in the room seems to shift, just a little, becoming a bit heavier. He bares his teeth in a grin, slapping his hands against the frame again.

"Come on, then," he says. "You've got an unpredictable bastard hitting your portal. What are you going to do about it? Going to smite me? You should do it soon, if you're going to. Come on, then, come on!" His voice rises in volume, his words spinning away from him. "Come get me! Do I look like a man who has any sense of self-preservation? You don't know what I'm about to do. So come and stop me! Stop me before I make you fail in your one task or whatever the fuck you said. Come on!"

As if those are the magic words, the air electrifies, so much that breathing suddenly becomes difficult. And there they are, the god himself, hovering inches away from Wilbur, towering over him, and they have no face, but he imagines that if they did, they would be glowering.

"You may not," they say, each word slow and deliberate, "go to the End. You will not dare."

"You know jack shit about what I will and will not dare," he says. "I'm daring this, aren't I?"

"You presume much."

"I'm a presumptuous man," he says. "Always have been." He tilts his head, summons that grin again. "It got you here, didn't it? Will you talk to me now?"

They stare, without eyes. Their hood tilts. He chooses to take that as a yes.

"Because here's the thing," he says. "Phil says that you're a god. I'm willing enough to believe that. But I don't understand why you're here, or what your connection is to Dream,

and I don't appreciate not being able to understand things. But here's what I don't appreciate most of all." He leans in, as close as he dares, leaning his elbows against the portal frame and staring up at the impenetrable darkness under their hood.

(another flash of the twin halos, circling, circling, and they burn on the back of your eyelids like trailing comets)

"You say that this is the task set for you," he says. "Guarding the End. Well, that's all fine and good. But are you trying to tell me that you feel no responsibility to the rest of this server? All that power, and you spend most of your time waiting around here, a place that two people know about? Or four, now, I suppose." He squints. The darkness does not change. "You're a god, perhaps. But no god I know of sits on their arse while the world around them implodes. So I suppose I'm here to ask that you change that."

"You understand nothing of me," they say. "This is my task."

"Bollocks to your task," he says. "Fine, I don't understand? Then explain it to me. Explain to me what your reasoning is. People can say what they like about me. I know my own vices. But nobody has ever accused me of standing idly by." He frowns, considering.

(considering Tubbo, begging, screaming, pleading)

"Not usually, at any rate," he tacks on softly.

"It is not of you to know," they say, and this is like talking to a brick wall, isn't it? Perhaps he should realize that, and cut his losses. Anyone else might do the same. Phil would likely tell him to give it up.

(or rather, he would tell him to give it up, and then immediately take his place. Phil doesn't tend to back down, not even from gods, and he knows he got his reckless streak from somewhere)

"I don't like it when people tell me what I can and can't know," he states, "and furthermore, you're dead wrong. I'm banking a lot on this, but do you really think I can't feel the power coming off of you? If you try to tell me that there's nothing you can do about the shitstorm this server's found itself in, I'd tell you to pull the other one, it's got fucking bells on. So you've got some sort of abilities, and I bet you could help us with them, which means that actually, it is very much 'of me to know' what the fuck you're doing fucking around out here. And let me tell you something else about me" —His smile widens— "I don't take no for an answer."

"I could strike you down where you stand."

It is stated simply. Not a threat, but a fact.

"Then why haven't you?" he asks, and does not disguise the challenge.

The god stills. Their cloak stops moving in imagined wind. And then, they drift forward and down, hovering directly in front of him rather than over the portal-table. Like this, he no

longer has to look up to stare at their hood, and he's amused to note that all told, they're slightly shorter than he is.

"Are you going to give me an answer?" he asks.

The god does not speak. But in his head, he feels that presence once again, and he shudders at the sensation, of something else in his head, and he struggles to remind himself that this is different from the Egg, that this being isn't trying to make him their puppet. Probably. But it's still unpleasant, and he's sure he fails to keep a straight face at the intrusion.

And then

(the god reaches in and)

(hold fast, child of the universe)

(takes him outside of himself and)

he's falling.

He is falling without falling. Somewhere in him, he knows that he is standing in the exact same spot, that he has hard stone beneath his feet, that gravity is treating him just the same as it always has. But he is falling, and there are stars around him, pinwheeling and circling, and he flails on instinct, but there is nothing to hold onto, nothing to slow his descent. But there is also nothing to land on, nothing to stop him. He is falling into forever, and the infinite steals his breath, his voice.

(it is not for you to know but if you must if you must then I will show you)

The god is there. He is sure that this being is the god, though it is now something built of swirling light and a thousand eyes, all watching him, trained on him, and the light sears itself into his retinas, but he cannot look away. He is powerless to choose where to look. He is no longer certain that he has eyes, that he has a body. He is falling, and he is one with everything that he is falling into, and the god has control. The god is peering not only at him, but into him, and they have control, and they are both holding him and allowing him to slip through their fingers all at once, pouring themselves into his brain and opening a window to the universe.

For you, there can be made exceptions, they say without speaking, and their voice rings like a thousand clamoring bells. I have made such before. One more will be accepted.

Show me, then! he calls out, and he, too, is speaking without speaking. He does not have a mouth to move, cannot hear his own words, but he knows that the other understands him. *You've brought me here, so show me!*

(he is bodiless mouthless breathless and he doesn't understand what is happening and it is too soon, too sudden, and he did not have time to brace himself, and he is terrified, terrified that this god will not bring him back home, but he is here surrounded by the universe now and knowledge is what he needs so he will reach out for it with all he is)

The cosmos bend.

(here is the beginning of the world of us of everything we were here before all else)

Everything shifts. He feels a body again, but it is not his. He is sure it is not his. The god presses up against his mind, and he sees, feels, is

(a god, the god, but different, but whole, all the parts brought together, and the god as they are now is a fragment, a collection of power with none of the love, with none of the joy, with none of the hope, but he sees the god whole, and he recognizes him for who he is, and it makes no sense yet but he will stick to the course)

Dream. And there is a server that is familiar but not, a server that he has learned the smell of, the look of, the feel of, the way the dirt shifts beneath his feet, but the server is new, the server is just beginning, and there is no one here yet, only Dream. But not the Dream of now. This Dream is closer to the Dream he remembers from the earliest days, the Dream who grinned and laughed with no darkness in his tone, who play-fought with the kids and gave everything he had to making the server a home.

(the war was a game, once)

He watches without eyes as the server rises, becomes what he knows, and he watches the people populate it, people he knows, both friends and enemies, and through it all, Dream remains steady, remains someone who is arrogant, perhaps, and selfish, maybe, flawed to be certain, but good, and it is the Dream that Wilbur once called a friend. And this Dream is a god.

(here is then, and then passes to now)

And then, Dream again, but time has passed

(flashes of Tubbo, flashes of his *son*, a book held between them and foreign words of power dripping from their tongues)

and something is wrong, corruption lurking in the heart of him, and he is aware of it, aware of what it whispers to him, of how it tempts him, and he is terrified. Wilbur can feel his terror as keenly as if it were his own, because here is something that Dream knows: he will give in. Slowly, inexorably, but he is not strong enough to fight even the remnants of the poison that the dreamon left in its wake. He slides into darkness, listens to the whispers that know exactly what strings to pull, exactly what to offer him, and through all of it, he is alone, pushes everyone else away, both because the rot demands it and because he still fights it, still fights though he is flagging, and he does not want to subject his friends to the thing that part of him, at least, is still aware that he is becoming.

And then, he gives in, but in the last moment of clarity before the waves break over his head

We were one, and now we are two, the god announces, and their voice is not sorrowful, because Wilbur now understands that they are not capable of sorrow. *The power separated,*

such that the demon could not access it. I am the power. He divided himself from me, and he is the rest, the emotions, the once-divine humanity now splintered and broken into a dark creature, consuming the good that he once was. I was set the task to contain him. There must be no travel to the End, nor to anywhere else.

(and he sees it now, like this, existing outside of himself, cradled in the god's hands and in the many hands of the universe, sees the corruption like chains, like choke, spread throughout what Dream was and is, gnarled threads of a sickness, of a venom, souring him from within and now lashing out, but he cannot see, he cannot see if underneath it all, there is anything of the original left, any of the light, anything worth trying to save)

(for the old Dream's sake, he almost hopes that there is not, that the old Dream, the Dream that once was and was good, has found peace, is not suffocating under the weight of what he is now)

(but then, there is this also to consider: Dream makes his own choices regardless of the influence, and he cannot be held to be blameless, and demonic interference or not, none of this is so cut and dry, and just because he dislikes such complications does not mean they do not exist)

But still, his questions have not entirely been answered, his demands not yet met.

I see that, he says, but I don't see why that means you can't help us.

I already have, they reply. More than I should have. But the universe did not object.

And he is somewhere else. Back in the portal room, though the walls are now bare, the décor matching the rest of the stronghold, and though he knows that somewhere, sometime, this is where he stands, there is no sign of him, but the god is there, hooded and cloaked, and there is another man, an open book held out before him like an offering, his hands shaking, his expression pleading.

(he knows this man. his hoodie is as garish as ever)

"I'm out of options," the man says. "I've got so much to do, and a power that I can't control, and I can barely remember my own name half the time. But this is right, I think. This is what needs to happen. If this server is going to survive, we need him, and we need him now. It's the only chance there is."

"I guard the End," the god says, and it is not the god-of-now, the god that still presses against and into Wilbur's mind. This is not now at all. This is some otherwhen. "I do not do this."

"But you have the power to," the man argues. "I've traced you throughout history. I've taken notes! I have them all here. They'll call you DreamXD, one day." He takes a step forward, shoving the book toward the god more insistently. "This is how we do it. I've seen so many awful futures. I keep their stories with me. But this is how we do it. This is how we save people. Please, I don't know how much longer I have left here. But you can't stand aside now, or else the Egg—the Egg wins. I've *seen* this, man."

“The universe has not willed that it is of me to choose who lives and who dies,” the god states.

“Has the universe willed that it is not of you?” the man asks.

(and the god asks the universe and the universe says)

And then they are gone, wheeling away, and the cosmos are back, surrounding him once again, stars and galaxies and void between them all, and suddenly, Wilbur understands.

You were talking about me, he says.

Yes.

You’re the one who brought me back, he says.

Yes.

Like an explosion has gone off within him,

(anger rage and what gives this god the right to make that choice what gives them the right to use them as a pawn he refuses to be a pawn because if he cannot take his fate into his own hands then what does he have)

he bucks, struggles against the god’s hold, a hold that is not at all physical, that he cannot hope to shake. But then, he is not physical either, is made up entirely of his thoughts and his feelings and his soul, if he were one to believe in souls, and he jerks away from the god, reeling in every way possible, anger and confusion and a thousand other emotions running through him. And for a moment, the god’s presence fades entirely, and he is alone, and he is drifting, and he is with the universe, vast and empty and full, and beyond the universe, the void awaits him, and now that he is here, he can remember

(he is alone and at peace even while the nothingness consumes him, but then there is someone reaching for him, someone pulling him, and he does not want it, does not want to go, but their hold is inescapable, and he screams with everything he has as he is pulled from the grip of the universe and slammed with sensation, with light, sound, color)

(he gasps back to life with mud between his fingers and rain in his eyes)

He wants to scream now. Perhaps his body is screaming, wherever it is.

He looks to the universe and demands answers, and he feels the universe looking back, too much for him to understand, too much for him to contain, vast and infinite and forever, and the universe says, without words, without sound, without anything at all,

(everything you need is within you)

(you are stronger than you know)

(the darkness you fight is within you)

(the light you seek is within you)

(you are not alone)

and he feels the god again, reaching for him again, reaching for him as they did before, ready to tear him from this space and back to the world, back to a world he did not want to rejoin, and a thousand stars are watching him, and there is a woman watching him with death's face and eyes, and in time, they all say,

(there is beauty yet to be found, Wilbur, in the world, and the universe loves you but we are not alone in that and we sing with a thousand voices that you cannot hear but you are one with us now and always a child of the cradle of the beginning and the end and we are with you)

and he screams without a throat, and when the god gathers him up, he does not fight, does not fight as the universe swirls around him,

(and there are flashes, too quick to understand, flashes of a god in the desert, counting the hours of peace like grains of sand, flashes of an ageless distortion in the code, an all-too familiar being who no longer remembers what they are, flashes of the man who falls through time, flashes of a woman with bleached-white flowers in her hair, flashes of the ghost who was ripped back along with him, ripped back by clumsy, inexperienced hands, ripped back and now tied to him, and Schlatt is drifting aimless in the crater but Schlatt sees him, stares with wide eyes, mouths his name in shock before he loses sight of him)

does not fight as he falls once again, falls and then staggers, the portal room unchanged to his bleary eyes. Gravity asserts itself, reality solidifies, and the god hovers in front of him, hooded and cloaked, darkness in place of a face. He is alone in his mind, and it feels empty.

“If there is beauty yet to be found,” he says, his voice a harsh rasp, “then help us fight for it.”

The god regards him. He does not buckle beneath the weight of their stare. His skin buzzes, and stars swirl on the back of his eyelids.

And then, the god vanishes. But perhaps most notably, the god does not say no.

The universe hums. Or perhaps it's the End Portal.

He thinks it's both.

He staggers, sinks down to the stone, exhausting tugging him down, and he leans his head back, releasing all the air in his lungs at once. His body feels too small for him, too tight, as if it can no longer encompass all that he is, all that he has seen. He's not entirely sure what all of that was, but he is fairly sure that it is not a thing meant for mortals to know.

Ah, well.

He's shaking. He observes his hands idly. Blinks, and there are stars imprinted on his eyelids.

He drifts. He's not sure how much time passes before there are footsteps rushing down the corridor. Three pairs. He probably should have expected this. Phil is the first to burst into the room, face painted with concern and wings uncloaked, but the other two are quick on his heels, Tommy visibly scared and Techno panting with exertion.

"Wil—" Phil says, and Wilbur blinks, and Phil is kneeling right next to him, a hand on his face, and Techno is crouched close by and Tommy is practically looming. "I felt—it was like the code itself *shook*, and there were crossbow bolts in the wall—"

"Why's your hair gone all weird?" Tommy asks, overriding Phil, and Wilbur blinks at him, slowly. His—?

He reaches up to grab a bit of it, pulling it down in front of his eyes. The brown is streaked with white.

"Oh," he says, and wonders how to phrase any of this. "Phil, I'm pretty sure I saw your wife for a second there."

"*What—*"

So he explains. Not everything. But he explains his thought process and weathers Phil's scolding, and he explains what he's learned about Dream and the Egg both, explains the root of Dream's corruption, explains that he was a god that split himself from his power at the last, explains everything that he can think to put into words.

He does not mention Karl. And he does not mention what the universe said. Some things are meant to be safeguarded by one, and one alone, and even if he tried to speak on it, he doesn't think he could find the right words. And his tongue is growing thicker, his words tumbling over each other.

But he rallies.

"But whether I got what I wanted or not," he says, putting all the rest of his energy into making sure each word lands, "we need to go back to the SMP tomorrow. Tomorrow morning, I mean. No more of digging through old books with a snowball's chance in the Nether of actually finding what we need. We need to go back, and we need to work with everyone else. Hopefully with some kind of divine aid, but if not, we figure something out." He meets Phil's eyes. "Gods can be overthrown, and Dream is no god. Not anymore."

"And even gods can die," Phil murmurs.

"Even gods can die," he agrees, and then pauses. Blinks. The stars are still there. "I think I'm going to go to sleep now."

"Alright, Wil," his father says, and the last thing he's aware of before his exhaustion finally, *finally* pulls him under, is being lifted in someone's arms, someone's hand carding through his hair, and quiet conversation. Their voices chase him into rest.

Chapter End Notes

Been excited for this chapter for a while now, so I really hope that it made sense lmao. I feel like I dropped a lot on you there :D

Thank you again for all the support you guys have given me (1,000 kudos?? holy cow???), and my tumblr is [here](#) if you'd like to stop by!

Next up, Chapter Sixteen: In which Wilbur tries to talk Tommy through a few things, and then finds himself face to face with his son.

Note 6/3: Due to a combination of writer's block and a couple of irl things popping up, I'm going to have to push the next chapter back a week. It should be out on June 11th, so if you're here looking for the usual Friday update and not finding one, that's the reason why. Sorry about that, and thanks for your patience!

head down

Chapter Notes

I'm back, y'all. Sorry about the unanticipated two-week wait; if you didn't see my note, either here or on tumblr, it was essentially a combination of writer's block and a couple of irl things popping up. But here's an almost 9k word chapter to make up for it! *jazz hands*

... I hope you all like dialogue, though. You guys like dialogue, right?

Content warnings this chapter for swearing, referenced death, and mild suicidal ideation.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Are you sure you’re good?” Tommy asks him.

Around them, the lava of the nether pops and crackles, the heat sticking to him like resin. Techno and Phil walk ahead of them, swords out in readiness for the odd ghastr or hoglin, and Ranboo trails along behind them like a lost duckling. He could walk with them, he knows, probably should, but weariness clings to his bones today, and he doesn’t feel much up to the conversations he knows Phil might try to start. So he’s been walking a few paces to the rear, hands shoved in his pockets, but now here is Tommy, dropping back to keep pace with him.

“I’ve said it already, haven’t I?” he asks, and just an ounce of irritation leaks into his tone. “I’m fine, Tommy, I promise. And I’ve already had an earful from Phil this morning, so I don’t need you to repeat it.”

He anticipated it, of course. After his worry subsided, Phil was not particularly happy to learn that he provoked a dangerous god on purpose. He doesn’t blame him for that, but being chided like a child rankled. Still rankles.

(he doesn’t blame him, though, truly, because it is easy for some part of him at least to look at it through Phil’s eyes, and it must have terrified him, finding him slumped against the portal like that, eyes hazy and words slurring, some sliver of the infinite still hanging about him like a shroud)

“I’m not Phil,” Tommy says, seeming offended by the very prospect. “I’m not—you just scared me, Wil. And you’re still acting all out of it.” His eyes drift upward, landing around the vicinity of his forehead, and Wilbur knows he’s staring at his hair again. It makes him want to pull his beanie forward to hide it, but that would draw a different kind of attention, a different kind of concern.

(he looked in the mirror this morning. almost a third of his hair, it seems, has been bleached white, in streaks that stand out starkly against the brown. he wouldn’t mind it so much if

people would stop looking at it, would stop looking at *him* like he's some sort of zoo animal)

"I don't know if you noticed, but I had kind of an eventful night last night," he says. "I'm just tired, is all."

Tommy's face darkens, and he glances away. "I wish you wouldn't do that," he mutters.

"Do what?"

"*That*," Tommy says, gesturing. "It's—it's deflection, is what it is. Puffy told me so. It's called an avoidance tactic." He sounds out the syllables one by one, obviously repeating something he heard. "I thought you said you weren't going to hide shit anymore. You said."

"I—" He breaks off, sighing. "I know. Tommy, I'm sorry. I just feel like focusing on the current problem is what we need to be doing right now. And then later we deal with all of my shit. Can't do that if we've all been sacrificed to an egg cult. But I really am just tired, Tommy. Nothing more than that."

"I feel like last time we tried to focus on the current problem and ignore all of yours, it didn't go so well," Tommy says, and there's no real heat to his words, but Wilbur stops in his tracks. He's not sure why it hits him so hard, in this moment of all moments, but it does. Perhaps his ability to emotionally distance was damaged last night, somewhere between having a god in his head and staring into the void once again. He feels raw, in a way. An exposed wire.

"Oh," he says.

(dark walls dark walls and dark paths and no railings and he didn't place the buttons but he may as well have for all that they were projections of him)

Tommy takes several more steps before realizing that he's not beside him anymore, and he stops, too, turning. "Oh," he echoes, eyes widening. "Wait, no, that wasn't—I wasn't trying to—shit, Wilbur, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to just bring it up like that."

"You shouldn't be apologizing," he manages. "You have every right to bring it up. You're the one who got hurt."

(you hurt him even though you didn't mean to, lashed out because some part of you was crying out for help and this was the only way you knew how to ask for it, so convinced were you that you deserved nothing, nothing at all, deserved to be consigned to the dark, and you didn't mean to but you hurt him all the same)

"Nothing can hurt me," Tommy says, probably an automatic response, but Wilbur shoots him a look, and he trails off. This doesn't seem like the time or place to be having a conversation like this, not with the snap-pop of lava beneath and all around them and the wail of mobs in the distance, but if they're going to have it, then let them have it. "Alright, yeah. I guess." His eyes skitter off him for a moment, drifting to one of the closer lava pools, and then back again. "But you were hurt too, Wil."

"That's not an excuse," he says.

“No, but it’s—it’s a reason, y’know? It’s an explanation. And it’s not—it’s not an excuse, I’m not trying to say it’s an excuse, but it’s still important. And I—I’ve forgiven you, really, for all of it. So this isn’t—I just don’t want things to end the same. And I’m a, a little bit freaked out lately, Wilbur, if you couldn’t tell, because this all just seems like history repeating itself. We were supposed to be done with shit like this, and then you came back and I thought to myself, here it is, here’s our second chance. But now we’re fighting Dream *again*, and the whole server might be taken over by now, and it’s us against the bastards in charge but that didn’t *end* well last time, Wilbur!”

“It’ll be different,” he offers, and his voice falls flat.

“You can’t know that,” Tommy says. “There’s no way for you to—*Prime*, Wilbur, I just wanted everything to stay the same.” He buries his face in his hands. “You, me, and Tubbo. Back the way we used to be. None of this shit. But Dream’s out again and Phil and Techno are here, and you know, I never wanted to see them again. Did you know that? I wanted them to stay just, just so fucking far away. But then Techno did *that*, in the Egg room, and Phil’s wings are all fucked, and—and I didn’t want to think they cared, Wil, I didn’t, but now they do, and it’s all messy and complicated, and I hate it, I hate it so much, and I don’t understand why I can’t ever have anything good—”

It’s nice to hear that Tommy is, perhaps, inching toward forgiving Phil and Techno. Wilbur would rather like to have a family at the end of this, even if they can never be what they once were. But the rest of that speech is what takes up his attention, and he strides forward, reaching out and gripping Tommy’s elbows.

“Hey,” he says, insistently, “no, no, that’s all wrong. You get to have good things. You haven’t had nearly as many good things as you deserve, and that’s at least partially my fault, but once this is all over, you’re going to have so many good things, you won’t know what to do with them all. But you deserve good things and you can have them, I swear, because you’re so good, Tommy, do you hear me? You’re so good. And I will make fucking sure that you get those good things if it’s the last thing I do.”

Tommy lowers his hands. His face is not tear-stained, as Wilbur half-expected, but his eyes have grown irritated, and they glimmer in the red-orange light.

“But you’re one of the good things,” he chokes out, “and you don’t even fucking want to be here. You want to *leave* again.”

His heart twists in on itself.

“Oh,” he says, much weaker, this time. “Tommy, I—”

What can he say to that? He’s promised himself not to lie anymore. Not to him. But he can’t give him any comfort, not regarding this, because while he feels steadier than he did at the start, more resigned to this new life he’s been

(pulled into by a god at the request of the universe)

granted, more determined to stay if only for Tommy's sake, but that's the thing. It is for Tommy's sake. For the sake of all the other people who somehow seem to want him around. It is not for his own.

(he forgot how to live for his own sake a long, long time ago, and though he can at least recognize as much now, recognition does not lead him to a solution, a solution he's not even sure he wants)

"I'm sorry," he finishes, because it's all he has to give, inadequate though it is, and he takes Tommy's hands. "I'm not leaving. Not on purpose. I swear that to you. I'm not leaving."

"You—what are you doing?" Tommy asks, and he blinks. Tommy blinks back, his face scrunching up, and he lifts their joined hands. Both of them are now stained with blue. Which—what?

Oh. Did he—he did, didn't he? Opened up his inventory, pulled out the blue dye from days ago? Pressed it into Tommy's hands on instinct, some drive insisting that it would help, that it would be better than nothing at all, that even if it was nothing but dye it would at least show that he cared, that he was trying?

He must have. He did. He remembers doing it now. He didn't even think about it, moved on some natural impulse.

"I don't know," he says.

(calm yourself, have some blue)

(calm yourself, have some blue)

(*calm yourself, have some blue*)

"This is Ghostbur's thing," Tommy says.

"I'm not Ghostbur."

(for his heart beats in his chest beats out *alive alive alive* in a way that Ghostbur's never could, though his blood stained his sweater, and yet he has Ghostbur's memories and if he is not Ghostbur, shares nothing with the shade, then what was the ghost, in the end, and where did he come from, if he was not)

"But Ghostbur was part of you, wasn't he?" Tommy says, and he sounds just a bit calmer, now, so maybe the blue has helped. Even though it's just dye. "Even if he wasn't *you* you. So he's still part of you, isn't he?"

"I—" His heart is thundering. He doesn't know why. "I haven't been thinking about it. Not like that."

(he has to keep Ghostbur separate from him has to consider him separate because the ghost was not him the ghost in all his smiles and useless platitudes and all-encompassing desire to help was not him his endless love was not him because the ghost was useless to the last but

he was good and kind and he has never believed that he is any of those things so the ghost must be separate must have come from him but been separate been something else in the end and there must be nothing but faded memories to connect them)

(but you know better than that, deep down, know better than to truly believe that your kindness exists as a different entity from the rest of you because you are capable of so much if you only allow yourself if you are only given the space to grow and to be if someone stops you from taking the world on your shoulders and the ghost was the you that broke was a you that rejected the responsibility was a you that crumbled and he was what remained but he was you he was you he was you but less and you are him but more)

(and perhaps one day you will learn to accept yourself better)

“Maybe you should,” Tommy says, and glances away. “Ghostbur tried. And he was my brother too. You’re my brother. No matter what, that hasn’t changed. Even if you’re a prick.”

Tears spring to his eyes, surprising him, and he blinks them back.

“Right,” he says. “Right, I—yeah. Okay. But Tommy, Tommy, listen to me, alright? I swear to you” —He squeezes Tommy’s hands, and watches as the blue dye runs between them. Their fingers will be stained for hours, and he finds that he doesn’t mind at all— “I will do everything in my power to make sure that good things come again. You say it’s all messy and complicated, and that’s true. I know that’s true. But we’re going to have time to figure it all out. We’re going to have time. And I’m including myself in that. I know I’m not—I’m not always the most trustworthy, I know that. But I promise, I mean this. Staying is—it’s worth it if it’s for you, alright?”

Something passes across Tommy’s face, too quick and too complicated to read. But he presses on, bringing Tommy’s hands up to his chest and keeping them there.

“We are not powerless,” he states. “History doesn’t make us, we make history. And if history is repeating itself, we don’t let it. We won’t let it. You deserve good things, Tommyinnit, and you’re going to get them.”

“If you say so, Wil,” Tommy says, and he still seems a bit discomfited, but also a bit steadier, now. A bit more secure.

“I do say so,” he says. “I’ll say it again if you need me to.”

“Please don’t,” Tommy says. “You’ve—see, look at what you’ve done, now my hands are all blue and sticky. You’ve given me sticky fingers, Wil.”

Tommy has chosen to end the moment, it seems. He’s not sure whether they’ve managed to say what needed to be said or not.

“Don’t say that to me,” he says. He squeezes Tommy’s hands one last time, and then lets go. “That makes me sound terrible.”

“Well, maybe you are,” Tommy shoots back, with a smirk that takes away any potential sting. “Live with it, bastard.” A pause, and then: “Did those arseholes even bother to wait for us? Dickheads, the lot of them. C’mon, they’ll start bitching about it if we fall too far behind.”

And then, Tommy grabs his hand himself, of his own volition, and starts to pull Wilbur along the path, cobblestone and meandering and precarious, and Wilbur’s chest feels hot, full of pressure. But it’s not quite a bad thing. Not a bad thing at all, in fact.

(he was always so cold in that ravine, no matter how he gathered his coat around him, shoved his hands in his pockets, and he watched everyone else and felt colder still, froze in the face of their flickering warmth with each other, and he turned away because he knew the warmth was not for him, that soon there would be no warmth at all)

(and the fire gave him heat but no warmth, his desired ending but no absolution)

(something you will keep to yourself: you were warm at the end, as your blood stained your father’s hands, as your vision dimmed and he held you close, so very warm at last, but it would hurt him to know that to hear from your mouth the relief you felt so you must not must not say)

The others have indeed had the decency to wait for them not too far ahead, and he nods in response to Phil’s raised eyebrow. *Everything’s fine*, he means to say, and Phil nods back and says nothing else about it, which he appreciates, for Tommy’s sake just as much as his. The portal isn’t far from there, and it’s not long before he’s stepping into the purple glow, closing his eyes at the dizzying upheaval of his surroundings.

The rain hits his face immediately. Thunder rolls, and wind buffets his jacket. It is a welcome change from the stifling heat of the nether, but he has to squint against the downpour, everyone else’s figures suddenly becoming shadowy, indistinct. The sky itself is dark and angry, black clouds churning, and it’s almost as if it were still night rather than early morning.

He takes another step out of the portal and almost trips. Looking down, he can’t stop his sudden inhalation. The color is dull, washed out in the lack of sunlight,

(though his mind is eager to fill in the gaps eager to show him)

but he doesn’t need the color to recognize the vine by his foot, nor any of the vines that crawl across the stone.

“Oh, fuck,” Phil says.

“We’ve been gone for a *day*,” Tommy says, disbelieving. “It wasn’t like this yesterday, was it?”

He cannot believe that leaving was a mistake, not with what it led to, even if the original plan was foolhardy. He does not regret the opportunity to petition a god, to make himself heard, even if it results in nothing in the end. But staring out over the landscape, the Prime Path ahead of them is choked with the things, and though the community house is little more than

a vague structure in the rainy haze, it almost appears as if it's grown hair, or tentacles, or something of that kind, so covered over with the foliage as it is.

"They're all okay, right?" Ranboo says, his voice nearly a whisper. "They all have to be okay."

Eret's castle is visible from here, but just barely. He can't tell if the vines have taken it over as well, but there's only one way to find out.

"I think we craft some boats, cross the lake rather than going by the Prime Path," he says. "Unless you'd like to chop your way through, but—" He glances at the ground. The vines are motionless, but he doesn't trust that not to change.

"I have to say," Techno says, "bein' strangled by Egg tentacles? Not my idea of a good time." There's nothing on his face except his typical disgruntlement, or at least, nothing that Wilbur can see. The wind whips his hair in and out of his face, the long pink strands obscuring his expression. But there is an edge to his voice, barely discernible. It wouldn't be, to anyone who didn't know him well. "If boats'll let us avoid the things, my vote's for boats."

Ranboo snorts, and then wilts when eyes turn to him. "It rhymed," he offers weakly, and Tommy groans.

"Can we give Ranboo to the Egg?" he asks, and Wilbur

(doesn't like that, not at all, even though he knows that Tommy is joking, though he knows that Tommy does not hear the Egg for some unknown, blessed reason and he's not looking that gift horse in the mouth, but that means that Tommy doesn't really get that it's not a thing to make jokes about, giving someone to the Egg, to the creep and crawl of something alien and void scraping out your mind and making it something that is you but not, you but slightly tilted, diagonal, something that fits the Egg's wants more than your own even if you don't realize it, and he doesn't have the energy to berate him for the quip but he really wishes he wouldn't suggest it, even in jest, even though he knows that Tommy copes through jokes and they're all just struggling to make it through this, really)

shakes his head. Phil's moved closer to the stairs, so he goes to join him, picking his way through the vines as best he can, and in his peripheral vision, he sees Techno and Ranboo follow.

"Someone's had the same idea," Phil says, inclining his head to the nearest bit of shoreline. There is a figure clearly visible there, though they are too distant and hidden by the gloom to make out features. They're pulling a boat ashore, and then they turn in their direction and raise a hand, making a come-hither gesture.

Lightning flashes, and thunder follows shortly thereafter. The brief instant of light is enough to illuminate Eret's features, the curl of his hair and his ever present crown.

"Are they on our side?" Techno asks, and—did anyone remember to fill Techno in? He certainly didn't, and he doesn't particularly want to right now. Even just watching the monarch puts a sour taste in his mouth.

(and some of the vitriol he directs at himself, because he is cognizant of his own hypocrisy)

“Presumably,” he mutters, but Tommy’s already making his way down, waving his hands around and shouting like a bloody moron, because of course he is, because of course Tommy’s not concerned with who might hear him.

(and that, at least, has not changed, and it is a good thing that Tommy still has it in him to challenge the world, to make his presence known, because that is part of what makes Tommy himself and he does not deserve to lose that, even when it is unwise, even when it can make everything else so much more difficult)

Which is not great, because not seeing anyone else around doesn’t mean that no one is there, so the only choice from there is to go after him and make sure he doesn’t get ambushed.

“I’m glad to see you all in one piece,” Eret says, as soon as they all come within hearing range. “You as well, Technoblade.”

Techno doesn’t dignify that with a response, but Eret continues, apparently unbothered.

“We saw the activity from the portal,” he says. “I thought I’d come to escort you all. You might have noticed, but the Prime Path is not currently particularly traversable.” He smiles wryly. “You’ll be please to know that the castle grounds, however, are currently free of unwanted flora, and aside from spreading these eyesores all over the place, the Egg and its cohorts have been quiet. If we’re quick about it, I don’t see us having much issue, and to that end” —He flicks his fingers, and two more spruce boats land in the water, summoned from his inventory— “I brought these. If you’d like, we can be on our way. Might be a bit bumpy because of the storm, but it’s perfectly passable.”

“Oh, we would like,” Tommy says, clambering in without hesitation. “We would like very much. C’mon, Ranboob, in.” He tugs on Ranboo’s hand, and Ranboo all but topples into the boat beside him. Phil and Techno claim the next one, and he—

He’s going to have to ride with Eret. Brilliant.

He sighs, stepping in and settling on one of the two seats. Eret barely casts him a glance before he gets to rowing, and then they’re off, gliding across choppy water. Wilbur stares into it, watches the ripples of the raindrops as they impact the surface, studies the patterns they make rather than looking at Eret himself. But even the noise of the wind and the thunder overhead cannot disguise the note of anticipation in the atmosphere.

“I really am glad you’re back, Wilbur,” Eret says. His voice is low, carries just enough to reach him, but the noise of the rain will prevent it from drifting to the other boats. “I’d been hoping for a chance to speak to you again for—quite some time now, actually.”

He shifts, and idly wonders how many conversations like this he’s going to have to have today. He’s already worn out from speaking to Tommy in the way that he did, though at least with Eret, he doesn’t feel the need to guard his tone nearly as much.

“You were involved in trying to resurrect me a while ago,” he says. Neutral, probing. “I remember that much.”

“You—so you do have Ghostbur’s memories,” Eret says.

“Some,” he replies. “Most, I’d say. What he bothered to remember, at least. He was never very good at figuring out people’s motivations, though. Very trusting, he was. Naive. Was it guilt that drove you to help? I can’t picture what you think you would have gotten out of it otherwise.”

It’s difficult to see Eret’s expression; the weather and his glasses unite to mask the minutiae of his face.

“I suppose it was, in the end,” he says, soft and slow. “I carry a lot of regrets with me. I’m sure that’s something you know a lot about. Regrets.” He stiffens, but Eret shakes his head. “I don’t mean that as an attack. Just a statement. I doubt you could find anyone on this server who hasn’t done something they wish they could take back. But for me, betraying L’Manberg, betraying you—that’s my regret. I’ve been aimless since then.” Lightning flashes again; he’s smiling, but Wilbur knows a joyless smile when he sees one. “A throne with no power, a crown that means nothing—none of that was worth betraying my friends. I know that now. So I’ve sought redemption, tried to make amends, and I’ve tried to change. I would like to think that I have. But the one person I needed to make it up to the most wasn’t here anymore. So I suppose you could say that it was guilt, that it was selfish of me. But I wanted to be able to atone to you. That’s all there was to it, really.”

He digests that for a moment. He isn’t sure how to feel about it.

(because on one hand his heart sings *traitor*, sings *you killed us all killed me killed my brothers killed my son*, but can he say that the betrayal was worse than his? can he deny Eret his redemption when he is struggling for atonement himself, forgiveness that he is certain he does not and never will deserve?)

(he’s thought through all of this before, gone round in circles again and again, and it might be time to make a decision)

“And what would you do if I didn’t accept your atonement?” he asks. He dips a hand in the water. When he lifts it out again, it is still stained blue.

“I would keep on,” Eret answers. “I think that’s all I could do. If you never forgive me, that’s more than understandable on your end. I hardly have the right to force the issue. But I’m completely sincere when I tell you that I want to be better. I’m trying to be better. And I don’t really know whether I’ve done a good job of that lately or not. I’ve been rather absent, truth be told. But I don’t plan on stopping my efforts.”

He frowns.

“That’s fair,” he says, “though I feel like you should know that I’m hardly the type of man who can go around giving other people absolution.”

“It’s not really absolution that I’m looking for,” Eret says. “More of a chance to try again.”

He has no answer to that. And no time to give one even if he had it, because the boat runs aground, the castle looming over them all, and true to Eret’s word, the walls themselves show no signs of encroachment, though the land surrounding it almost looks like a great red rug for all that the grass itself is barely visible.

“Tubbo managed to ward the castle,” Eret says, addressing all of them. “I’m still not entirely sure how. This isn’t a kind of magic that’s familiar to me. But whatever he did, it worked, and then when Fundy got here he backed him up. He did a really good job, actually.”

“Of course he did,” Tommy says. “He’s Tubbo.”

But Wilbur’s stuck on the other thing. Said so offhandedly.

The thought has crossed his mind, of course, that he has not yet seen his son. Has not yet so much as spoken to him. But it is one thing to know it in the abstract and quite another to be confronted with it suddenly. Fundy is in the castle, is mere feet away, and he is exhausted and entirely unprepared for this.

(and what a selfish thought that is, that he is unprepared to meet with his own child, unprepared to do the bare minimum, to tell him of his return, to apologize for hanging him out to dry, how selfish it is that his child has fallen so low on his list of priorities, how selfish, how selfish, and he does not know whether he has the strength to admit it out loud)

(he is certain that he owes Fundy an apology, just as he owes so many people apologies, and yet he remembers his son burning down the flag, burning down all he held dear, carrying out Schlatt’s every order to its full extent in a way that even Tubbo did not, and Fundy claimed that he was a spy all along, that he never truly turned against him, but by that time the damage had already been done and how was he supposed to believe when he already felt so alone, already felt like the world had turned against him and his legacy was ruined so all there was left to do was send it and himself to hell)

“Can we go in?” he asks. “We’re soaked. Unless there’s a point to hanging around here. And also—have you not set anyone to stand watch?”

There’s no one visible on the walls above them, and gates only do so much to keep out an invading force.

“The enchantments keep them out,” Eret answers, and places a hand against the gates. The wood shimmers slightly, the effect just barely perceptible, and looks almost as if the gate itself is rippling, distorted, like viewing it through a fun house mirror. “Or rather, as near as we can tell, the enchantments prevent the Egg from gaining a foothold in here. Which means if it wants to continue to communicate with its people, its people have to stay out.” With that, he pushes the gates, and they swing open with a horrendous creak.

“That would hardly stop Dream,” he remarks, and Eret inclines his head, conceding the point.

“True,” he says, “but to be fair, I’m not sure that gates would do much good to that end, either, whether we’re watching them or not. Better to be as well rested as we possibly can be.”

He remembers Dream’s appearance last night, his appearance and swift disappearance, and says nothing. Eret is right, of course; the highest walls and toughest gates and sharpest watchers all mean nothing in the face of someone who can go anywhere he pleases with a thought.

“You hear that, Wil?” Phil says, just a little too loudly. “Rest. Rest is important.”

“Like you’re one to talk,” he mutters, and at the same time, Ranboo starts asking about whether these enchantments can be applied to people as well, and he lends half an ear to that conversation, because that would be very useful. Eret tells him that Tubbo’s been experimenting, but even getting the wards up around the castle was a trial, so he’s not sure when they’ll be able to do much else, or whether any other breakthroughs will be in time to be useful, even with Fundy now helping, and—

There it is again.

(he should have done this sooner, should have done this before hesitance turned to outright avoidance, and for all Phil’s faults as a parent at least he has reason for what he’s done, reason and a willingness to face them now, and that is something that he evidently lacks, and his heart is caged by his own cowardice, and he doesn’t know what to expect from this and he hates not knowing what to expect, how to plan for it)

(there is no plan in the world that will help him right now)

Eret leads them into the castle, and it is warm and well lit, but it does nothing to assuage the chill settling in his bones.

“Most everyone’s down the hall there,” Eret says, pointing, “and I think I’ve got towels somewhere if you want to dry off—”

“Forget about towels,” Tommy interrupts, “where’s Tubbo?”

“He’s set himself up on the second floor,” Eret says. “If you want, I can—”

Predictably, Tommy’s already off, his feet slapping against the floor with wet squelches.

“I think the rest of us will take you up on the towels,” Phil says. “Particularly Ranboo, you still good there?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” Ranboo says. “Um, my armor protects me pretty well, so I’m good. But um, yeah, towels might still be a good idea.”

“Great. If you’ll follow me, then—”

He can put this off no longer. He grabs Eret’s arm, cutting him off.

“Is Fundy with Tubbo?” he asks.

For a moment, Eret is silent. He doesn’t particularly like the expression he’s making, somewhere between realization and pity. He does not need pity, doesn’t know what to do with it, and he especially doesn’t want it from Eret, of all people. Everyone else is silent, still, and he can feel their gazes on him like spotlights.

“Last I knew, yes,” Eret says.

“Does he know?”

He wonders if he should elaborate, but Eret doesn’t seem to need him to.

“He does. It, ah, wasn’t exactly broken to him in the softest way. Nobody was actually aware that the news needed to be broken at all, so I believe Puffy brought it up somewhere along the way here. I’m—not sure of the details.”

He doesn’t know whether that means Eret actually doesn’t know the details,

(doesn’t know how his son reacted to the return of his father, whether there was any happiness at all or just shock, perhaps betrayal, perhaps anger, perhaps perhaps perhaps he could have avoided this if he’d taken a little more responsibility from the start but now here he is and here they are)

or whether he’s sparing him them. He doesn’t know which he would prefer. If it matters.

“Alright,” he says, even if it’s the furthest thing from it. “I’ll be up there, then. Don’t wait for me.”

He doesn’t wait for a response before he’s turning on his heel and following after Tommy, even though it would have been wiser to ask for the specific room. He’s not feeling very wise at the moment. If he ever was wise. He doesn’t think he can say that he’s ever had a claim to wisdom. He thought that he was wise when he was running his own country, and look where that got him. Him, and everyone else.

He climbs up the stairs. Keeps his back straight. His head held high.

(it is habit to draw on the general’s role for strength since that was when he was strongest but is that not what caused so many of the problems in the first place? the general leads, wins, considers people in terms of numbers rather than names, and personal relationships fall to the wayside)

It’s the same room that he found Tommy and Tubbo talking in yesterday. The same room where he lingered outside the door rather than moving on, absorbing words that were not meant for his ears, old hurts that have their roots in him and his actions, that he is not sure he will ever be able to heal, to make up for. For a moment, he allows himself to do the same thing, stands just outside and listens to their voices. They’re easier to hear; the door hangs open rather than closed, likely from Tommy’s entry. Their voices overlap, Tommy talking

over Tubbo and then vice versa as they both try to explain what's happened in their day of separation, and Fundy—

Fundy is there, too, chiming in every now and again. He sounds—Wilbur isn't sure how he sounds. Pleased to be talking to the other two, perhaps. Beyond that, he doesn't know.

He doesn't know.

(it's a question you must ask yourself, whether you know your son at all, because you remember all too clearly cradling him in your arms and holding him close and vowing to protect him to see him safe no matter the cost but he grew older as children do and the cost was too steep too steep to pay for you looked at him and saw a child still for though he grew up too quickly he did grow up and your heart was too weak to accept it so is there any wonder that he came to resent you came to chafe under the watch of a man who could not see him for who he was and who he tried so hard to be)

(is there any wonder that he would go to such lengths to escape your shadow)

He steps forward. That's all it takes, to be standing in the doorway. And there he stays, arrested by the sight in front of him.

The room is intended to be a guest bedroom, clearly. There is a large, plush bed, several items of furniture: a dresser, a nightstand, a desk and several chairs, bookshelves along one wall. But the desk goes unused; books and papers are scattered across the floor, apparently without order or reason to the arrangement. Tommy has situated himself on the bed, still dripping with rainwater, bouncing up and down and wildly gesticulating as he talks—he's saying something about the god, now, and how it's such a shame that he didn't get to talk to it, because he would've gotten them to help in no time at all—and Tubbo is talking at the same time, whenever he can get words in, shoving old papers in Tommy's face and explaining what they mean, as if Tommy will understand any of it. Fundy brought these materials with him, evidently, brought all the dreamon-hunting things that remained in his possession according to the rapid-fire words out of Tubbo's mouth, and Fundy is there. He's there. Sitting on the floor, three books open in front of him, watching Tommy and Tubbo with rapt attention, jumping in whenever Tubbo needs help explaining something, and asking Tommy questions in the same breath.

He stands there. Watching. They all seem so comfortable with each other. It feels wrong to disturb that.

But—

“—and his hair's gone all weird now,” Tommy is saying, and he winces. “I'll bet he's not telling us everything that happened. Hair doesn't just do that. It looks so fucking weird, but not like, bad weird, you know? I guess that's what you get for shouting at god, am I right, fellas? Though if I were to shout at god, god simply would not be able to do anything to me, as I am too cool and powerful.”

“That—why does that sound like something he would do? Yelling at a god. Of course he did, that—” Fundy mutters, and Wilbur has no hope of interpreting his tone. “But he's, like—he's

okay? And he's here?"

"Yeah, he's—" And Tommy happens to glance at the door. They lock eyes. "Um. Here. Hi, Wilbur."

Tubbo turns to look. Fundy does as well, raising his head sharply and visibly flinching in the same motion, and Wilbur thinks that his heart flinches, too. If hearts can flinch. They can certainly stutter. Perhaps that's close enough.

"Hello," he says. Inadequate. Completely inadequate.

"Oh, you're right," Tubbo says after a second. "It does kind of look weird, but not bad weird. Just sort of interesting. Neat. Hi, Wilbur, did you have a good time yelling at god?"

Tubbo has a unique kind of frankness. It's refreshing, and he appreciates the effort to alleviate the tension. If that's even what he's doing.

"I don't know if good is the word I'd use," he says. "It happened. It was a thing. Have you had a good time doing magic? If that's the term?"

As he speaks, Fundy rises to his feet. Slow, cautious.

"Yeah, that's the word," Tubbo says. "It's been going really well, actually. I wasn't sure if I'd remember how to do any of this stuff, but Fundy brought all of the books with him when Puffy brought him over, so that's been really helpful. There's still nothing in here about killing the thing, but we've kept looking. There's probably plenty of other useful stuff. Actually, that reminds me." He turns back to Tommy. "I wanted to show you how we protected the whole castle. You probably saw some of the enchantments on your way in, but it's really cool, come on." He tugs on Tommy's hand, and Tommy allows himself to be led, and before Wilbur can react, they're brushing past him on their way out of the room. "See you in a bit, Wilbur!"

He glances after them, and then back into the room. The room where Fundy now stands, alone.

Tubbo definitely knows exactly what he's doing.

"Hi, Fundy," he says.

"Hey, Wil," Fundy answers.

He looks older than Wilbur remembers, even through Ghostbur's relatively new perception. But then, Ghostbur would not have noticed the new lines carved into his face, the bags beneath his eyes, his fidgeting, closed-off demeanor. He's shifted into a more human form for the moment, though fox ears stick out from underneath his hat; that, at least, has not changed. He is capable of appearing fully human, but he scarcely ever does. Wilbur always thought that it was a way of staying connected to a mother that he barely got to know.

But perhaps that's not it at all. Perhaps he shouldn't presume anything.

“So,” Fundy says, after a long stretch of silence. “You’re, um. You’re back.”

“I’m back,” he agrees.

(the awkwardness is like a rock settled in his throat and it shouldn’t be this way shouldn’t be this way at all but they’re in too deep and it’s all gone too far and some of the last words he spoke to his son were to disown him and he still doesn’t know whether he truly meant it or not in that moment but that hardly matters when the words were said regardless of the intent)

“Right,” Fundy says. “Right. And you’ve been back for a while. Tubbo said it’d been a couple of weeks.”

Is that right? He thinks back, calculating, and decides it must be.

“I suppose it has been,” he says, and that is his cue to follow up with an apology, but the words get caught in a vice, squeezed and choked to nothingness, and silence falls between them again. Fundy shifts his weight back and forth between his feet, his eyes darting to and fro, never landing on his face for very long.

“Okay,” he says at length. “I guess—I don’t really know what else I expected.”

It’s bitter and sarcastic and resigned all at once. He winces.

“Fundy—”

“I mean, I guess I knew,” Fundy continues. “I knew that I wouldn’t—that you wouldn’t come for *me* if you ever came back. So it’s—I mean, it’s fine, Wil. I don’t even need you, anyway. I’ve been doing really well on my own. So it doesn’t matter.”

“That’s not—”

“But it is, though, isn’t it? You could’ve—you could’ve come and found me, right? I wasn’t that far.” His voice has lowered in volume, as if he’s talking to himself more than he is to him. “I wasn’t that far, so you could’ve—but you didn’t, and that’s kind of par the course, isn’t it? For you to come back to—back to *life*, and not even send me a message. But I guess nobody else did, either. It’s fine.”

The vice releases, torn apart by his mounting desperation.

(too little, too late)

“I’m sorry, Fundy,” he says. “I should’ve told you sooner.”

“Okay then, why didn’t you?” Fundy replies, and his tone rises in pitch again, becoming high, almost frantic.

There are so many ways he could reply. He could say that it slipped his mind. That would be damaging, hurtful, would ruin any hope of fixing their relationship, but it would be at least partially the truth; he thought about it, but infrequently, and he always dismissed it as a task to be tackled later. He could say that he wanted to take it slow. That would be slightly more

of a lie, though not a complete falsehood; interacting with the other people of the server, especially in the first few days, has come far less easily to him than it once did. It probably says something that he includes his own son in that assessment.

He could say that he's a coward. That, perhaps, would be the most truthful of all.

(for in many things you are not the coward that you think you are but in this in this it is true is apt because you know you hurt him sorely did the one thing that a parent should never do to a child caused him so much pain and you knew it and you know it and you could not face him could not bring yourself to own up to it and that is cowardice to not face this fault of yours as you have faced the others that is cowardice and cowardice can be overcome and it is not the end is not a death blow but call it what it is for it is cowardice and if you are to make up for it you must face the flaw in yourself without the gilded lies)

"I wanted you to come back," Fundy says, and he realizes he's taken far too long to respond, and Fundy's expression has fallen. "I wanted you back so damn badly, even if I was never really sure why. I guess maybe I hoped that if you came back you'd start to care about me again."

"I do care about you," he manages, his voice a weak, pathetic thing. "I do care, Fundy."

(and he wants to say my little champion my little champion if you believe nothing else then believe this believe that I love you and I always have even in the midst of all my darkness even as I fell I could not despise you no matter what I said I have loved you always even though I failed you I love you please do not doubt)

(he doesn't say it)

"I want to believe you," Fundy says. "But see, the thing is, if I do, it'll turn out that you're lying to me. Either that, or you'll change. You—that's what you do. And I need you—I need you to make up your mind, whether you care about me or not, because I can't keep doing this. And I'm so—I'm pissed, Wilbur, really, I am. You blew up my *home*."

There is no excuse that will provide an escape from this.

"I did."

(an ending a denouement a grand finale and it was your symphony forever unfinished but you forgot that others made up the orchestra and you forget it still though you are reminded sometimes in the shadows in Tommy's eyes and the chips in Tubbo's horns and now in the tremor in your son's voice as he tells you what you took from him what you stole when you made an ending of it all and it was yours but it was not yours alone)

Fundy jerks back, as if he hadn't expected him to say it so starkly.

"Just like that, huh?" he says.

"I—"

“You know what?” Fundy says, overriding him. “I don’t really want to hear it right now. I’m so done with this. I’ll see you later. I guess.”

He steps forward, and

(an image: Fundy tottering toward him on chubby, unsteady legs, toddler’s face in a wide open, gap-toothed smile, Fundy running toward him to show him his new redstone invention, child’s face beaming in pride, Fundy sprinting toward him and trailing a flag behind him, grinning and victorious, and they have done it, they have done it, the nation is theirs and all will be well, and his son will be safe, and he wraps Fundy up in his arms and hugs him, holds him safe and close, his child, his beloved child)

he is frozen as Fundy steps past him and out of the doors. And he is frozen as he listens to his footsteps retreat, at a walking pace at first and then quicker and quicker as they fade, as Fundy runs from him. He stares into an empty room, and he is

(cold)

frozen.

“So, I’m guessing that didn’t go so well.”

It’s what he needs. An out, a way to cover over the churning mess of emotions in his chest, a road past all of that and right into exasperation, irritation.

“Shut the fuck up, Schlatt,” he says, pulling together all the shreds of composure that remain to him. “Where have you been?”

“Around,” Schlatt says, and drifts into view. He has the ability to go straight through him, but Wilbur notes that he doesn’t, that he dodges around him in the space left open in the doorway to come in front of him, surveying the papers in the room apathetically. “I keep going to do stuff and forgetting that I fucking can’t. Came here after whatever the fuck that was last night. You wanna give me an explanation there? I’m not pining away so much that I’m hallucinating your face, gorgeous as it is.” He pauses. “Your hair looks fucking stupid, by the way. It’s also wet, in case you didn’t know that.”

He feels some of the tension drain from him. This, at least, is familiar ground. Barbed words and sarcastic compliments, their old song and dance. He can exist in this space for a few minutes. Wrestle his emotions back under control.

“Thanks,” he says dryly. “If you really want to know, I spoke to a god and got shown some of the secrets of the universe, so that’s probably what that was.”

Schlatt pauses. “Is that all,” he says, in a half-laughing, half-incredulous tone that indicates he has no idea what to do with that.

He tilts his head, and wonders what else he should tell him. Because he saw him, there, of that he is sure, saw him while he was caught between the starlight and the void, as the god wound him back up and returned him to his body. He saw Schlatt, and more than that, he saw

(or felt, perhaps, because he was without eyes, and felt is not the right word either but it is closer, closer)

the connection between them, binding them together like a cat's cradle, the threads of their existence tangled up in each other, and he is certain, now, of why Schlatt is here as well, why Schlatt is here but not solid. Because the god reached and the god grabbed and the god pulled, and the god pulled more than they meant to but less than they ought to have done, and this is the result: one man resurrected and the second tugged along, unintentionally and thus set adrift, tied to the first but with no form of his own.

Schlatt is mixed up in this through no fault of his own,

(for once)

when Wilbur knows that he, like him, would rather have remained in the void. So he sighs, and reaches along the tether, reaches along the rope that connects them soul to soul, and it is easy to find now, easy to touch upon with intention now that he knows what it is, why it is there.

(now that the universe hums in the back of his mind, now that he can hear the stars' song, just barely beyond his conscious perception)

Schlatt lets out a surprised grunt as his feet hit the floor, and he staggers, almost losing his balance. Right away, Wilbur can feel the drain on his own energy, his life force, perhaps, and now he knows the reason for that, too—Schlatt has none of his own, so to be made present and real, he must share his, must send it down the line, and a few days ago, he would have struggled to figure out how to do that. But now, it feels like the simplest thing in the world. For a time, at least.

"I'm willing to chat about it for a bit," he says, and Schlatt stares at him, flexing his fingers.

"Holy shit," he says. "So can you just—*do* this now?"

He bares his teeth. Schlatt will take it for a challenge.

"Let me tell you about it," he says, and Schlatt arches a brow. But he stays, standing amongst the papers and the mess.

This is something familiar. This is a half hour of conversation that is charged in an entirely different way. This is someone with whom he shares a bitter past, and likely a bitter future, but he doesn't have to watch himself, doesn't have to wonder what wounds he's caused him, doesn't have to confront anything within himself.

He's self-aware enough to realize that he's running away, a bit, with this. Seeking a distraction. Trying to banish the look on Fundy's face from his mind. But the others will survive without him for a few more minutes, and even besides, Schlatt offers him something that he wants, that he needs. Schlatt will listen to him, and he will judge him, but he will not pity him.

So Wilbur tells Schlatt about meeting a god.

Chapter End Notes

Haha I... really hope none of you were expecting that reunion to go particularly well. Also, shapeshifter Fundy pog.

Thank you all for the response to the last chapter; I've been sitting on several of those reveals for a while lol. As usual, my tumblr is [here](#), and also, I posted a new one-shot this week, so if you'd like some self-indulgent Crowbur, that's [here](#)!

Next up, Chapter Seventeen: In which trying to come up with a new plan is difficult when a) half the people in the room have a bloody history with each other, b) your own mental health issues are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore and also you're pretty sure that your son hates you, and c) Schlatt is present.

'til the work is done

Chapter Notes

Ngl, this chapter fought me tooth and nail, and I'm still not particularly happy with it. But sometimes you just gotta let things go, so here we are! New chapter, on schedule! Time for *checks notes* Even More Dialogue!

Chapter content warnings for swearing and references to past suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In retrospect, it's not his best idea. He seems to be full of those, lately. Not-great ideas. This one is foolish simply for the fact that he is already tired, and gifting energy to Schlatt is a strain on his already depleted reserves. It takes about twenty minutes for him to get dizzy, and another two after that before spots start drifting across his vision, and at that point, he has to admit defeat, cutting himself off mid-sentence and breaking their connection. Schlatt swears as he loses his tangibility.

"Fuck, that felt weird," he says. "What the fuck was that, why'd you stop?"

He wets his lips. It takes longer than it should for the words to formulate.

"I told you, we're essentially sharing a lifeforce, Schlatt," he says. "There's only so much I can give you."

Schlatt starts hovering in the air again, regarding him with a dark stare. And then, his expression clears.

"Oh, I see, so you're being a dumbass," he says, and Wilbur wants to protest, but he can't get a word in edgewise. "Why the fuck are you giving me shit you can't afford to lose, then? Jesus Christ, Wilbur, would you sit down?"

"There isn't time for that," he replies. "I've spent too long up here already. I need to go and meet with the others."

Schlatt stares at him for a long moment. He's not sure why. And when he speaks, his voice is —strange.

"I was right about you," he says. "You really don't change. Not when it comes to yourself. You're just as stupid and self-destructive as you always have been. And now that coating of paint you try to put on over it? That's flaking off. The only question is how many people you're going to bring down with you this time." He shakes his head, and his eyes narrow, expression hovering somewhere between a dark satisfaction and something else, something

difficult to interpret. “You’re wearing yourself thin. I see it, everyone else can probably see it. But you can’t. Or you do, but you can’t accept it.”

(you put on a smile for the masses an upbeat tone for your friends but you’re a sinking ship and you know it, and you think it might be easier to let yourself drown even though you know you won’t, because you cannot allow yourself to fail because you are leader you are president and this is everything you fought for so it is a fault in you if you cannot handle it so you push through you make yourself and you scream into your pillow and cry yourself to sleep because at the end of the day your self-loathing clings to you like cobwebs and secondhand smoke)

He inhales.

“I don’t see how me needing to have a meeting with everyone else has led you to that conclusion,” he says, tone frosty, “but you can think what you want. And besides, you can hardly talk. We’ve had a conversation like this already.”

He turns on his heel, letting his coat flare out behind him; though, it’s still damp, so the motion isn’t nearly as satisfying as it usually is. But Schlatt follows along with him, and he grits his teeth, letting each of his footfalls resound with purpose, with confidence that he is struggling to truly find.

This was definitely a bad idea. Engaging with Schlatt always is. He should know this by now, should know that a welcome distraction can turn unwelcome at the drop of a hat.

“I never said that I was any better,” Schlatt says, “but that’s the difference between you and me, Wilbur. I know exactly what I am. You don’t know who the fuck you are, so you hide behind labels because that makes it easier for you to think about.”

(general president exile villain and round and round it goes and there is truth to his words because he scrambles for stability scrambles to fit the old roles but the fact of the matter is that he is something new and he is floundering because for all that he wants to be better he has never known how so it’s casting a coin in a wishing well and hoping)

“I know exactly who I am for the moment,” he says, “and that’s someone who’s going to get rid of the fucking Egg and pummel Dream’s face into the ground. For now, that’s more than good enough.”

He gets to the stairs again, and takes them two at a time on his way down.

“Fine, then, just don’t come crying to me later,” Schlatt says. “So, what’s the deal with Dream anyway? How the fuck did he get out of prison?”

That actually gives him pause for a second.

“I’m not actually sure,” he says. “A question for the warden.” One that he does intend to ask, if only to know how, exactly, Dream made what was supposed to be a secure prison seem like child’s play to escape. Was he waiting for the right moment all along? He’s not sure he likes the implications of that,

(especially since he deemed the right moment to be after Wilbur's return, during the implementation of a plan that he helped to form, and it sickens him that he might have played any role in Dream's decision making, that he might have led everyone into these circumstances, eyes wide open but blind all the same)

but it would make sense, considering everything that he's learned, considering what he now knows of the rot that's woven itself into Dream's very being. The corruption that lends him power.

"How much have you even been here for?" he continues, glancing at the ghost out of the corner of his eye. "Do you have any idea what's been going on, or have you just been fucking around since the last time I saw you?" *When you ran away from Tubbo*, he does not say, and he wonders if Schlatt catches it anyway.

There is a beat, and then, "I—know that Dream's out," Schlatt says, the words reluctant, and he suppresses a bark of laughter.

"So, you know jack shit," he says.

"I wouldn't say that."

"You know jack shit," he repeats. "That's fine. Stick around, I'm sure you'll get caught up to speed."

"Oh, great, yeah, that's exactly what I want, hanging around you chumps some more," Schlatt mutters. "What a good time. God, I need a drink. Or you know what, I'd settle for a fucking protein shake. You got any of those around?"

He doesn't respond. It takes some effort, but anything he could say would only rile him up further, and any indication of *actually, you do not need a drink, and I am going to make sure that you don't get one literally ever* is sure to set him off, which is exactly what he doesn't need right now. So he lets Schlatt complain as he backtracks to the entrance hall, and then to the throne room where he assumes everyone else is.

His assumptions are proved correct the moment he draws close enough to hear everyone's voices. Talking over each other, tones fluctuating. It sounds anything but peaceful.

Eret has moved their throne aside, he notes as he stops in the doorway. Most of the room is now taken up by a large wooden table, clearly meant to be a place for meeting. He appreciates the gesture, or would, if anyone seemed to be using it. His eyes find Techno and Phil first, next to a cluster of torches; Techno is still wringing water from his hair, looking very put out, but his posture is tense, on guard, and Phil looks about the same, even as he helps Ranboo get the last of his armor off without flicking himself with water.

(it is easy to forget that his family is among enemies there, that at least a few of these people would like to see them dead)

He finds Fundy next. He's standing by himself, ears flat against his skull, and every now and then he twitches toward Eret. But the main spectacle in the room is the ongoing argument,

and he narrows his eyes, trying to pick out the participants and their stances. There's Quackity—and that's an interesting scar on his face, though with what he knows of the man's combat ability, or lack thereof, he was bound to gain an injury like that sooner or later, with the server being what it is—shouting at Sam, who looks like hell, frankly, and Puffy next to Sam trying to defend him, maybe, and Sapnap by Quackity's side trying to calm him, and then there's Eret, who appears to be trying to mediate with little success.

“—don't fucking care,” Quackity is saying, and he sounds near-hysterical, words spat out at a record pace, even for him, “I do not fucking care what the rules were, I do not fucking care, just, *fuck*, Puffy, stop trying to defend him, if he'd kept Dream locked up like he was supposed to, like his job was, like we all *trusted* him to, we wouldn't be in this situation in the first place, just, I don't fucking understand how you could've let that happen, Sam, I don't —”

He keeps going, and at the same time, Eret's voice overlaps—“We've been through this already, Quackity, and I don't see how this is helping.”—with Puffy's—“You're the one who needs to fucking stop, it wasn't his fault, so stop yelling at him!”—and Sapnap's—“C'mon, Q, please, I know, but you think tearing into each other is gonna help right now?”—and Sam himself is just standing there, taking it, eyes dull.

On the other side of the room, Tommy and Tubbo appear in the opposing set of doors and draw up short, Tubbo placing his hand on Tommy's shoulder to pull him back, face settling into what might be resignation. This isn't the first time, then.

Schlatt whistles. “Damn,” he says. “Something about this is familiar.”

“I do not want to know that,” he replies, eyeing Quackity. “Don't tell me anything about your relationship, I categorically do not want to know.”

“Wait, what the fuck do you think I'm talking about—”

He meets Techno's gaze. Techno raises an eyebrow, pointedly squeezes his hair with a towel, and inclines his head, as if to say, *You deal with this*. He glares back, trying to convey, *Fuck off, I am not in charge of corralling these fuckers*, and Techno rolls his eyes, the arsehole, because of course, he knows that that's a damn lie, and actually, he kind of has put himself in charge of corralling these fuckers.

(something about this is familiar indeed, and these could be earlier days if he takes a step back and squints, looks at them all through blurry vision, and this could be a nation risen up around a drug van if he tilts his head just right, and he could be in charge of leading them, because the original members are all here, him and Tommy and Tubbo and Fundy and Eret all here, except the arguments are sharper and lined with more desperation than any of their original squabbles, before the war became real, before everything, before it all fell apart for the first time, before *it was never meant to be*, and he can lead, can pretend that it is all like it was then, but it would be unwise, perhaps, to forget that it is not like then at all)

So he steps further inside, notes with some displeasure the way that no one has marked his presence yet, and says, as loud as he can, “What the fuck are you all shouting at each other for, then?”

Quackity cuts off abruptly, which solves eighty percent of the noise problem, and Puffy stops after he does, which solves another fifteen percent. Quackity wheels toward him, not quite shocked, but still surprised, perhaps.

“Holy shit,” he says. “They said you were back, but—wow, Wilbur, you’re looking good. For a dead guy, I mean.”

“Thank you, Quackity,” he says, nodding. He strides up to the table, though he doesn’t sit, and splays his hands against it. It would probably be more picturesque if he weren’t still dripping a bit, but he made his choice to forgo towels and that’s the hill he’s dying on, apparently. “You’re also looking good. It’s nice to see you.”

“Tell him he looks sexy,” Schlatt suggests, and with a great amount of fortitude, he ignores him.

“So,” he continues, “is any of this arguing actually something that needs to be happening right now? Or can we move on to arguing about different things?”

Quackity’s face twists. “I’d say we do need to be arguing about it, actually,” he says. “Look, Wilbur, I know you—you left a while ago, right, so you’ve missed a lot, so I’m not sure how much about this you know. But Sam was supposed to be in charge of the prison. He had one job, and that was to keep Dream in his cell. And now look at where we are. So, yeah, I’d say it’s something that needs to be happening.”

(people keep saying that, that he *left*, and that’s not quite right, because *leaving* is slinging a bag over one shoulder and waving goodbye and *leaving* implies going somewhere when he wanted to go nowhere at all, and *leaving* is a sanitary way to phrase the desperate exit he made and perhaps they don’t know better or perhaps they do but don’t want to confront it but either way something in him recoils whenever they say he *left* because that is not the word is not the word at all and if they’re going to bring it up he wishes that they would actually bring it up rather than dance all around it dance in quicksteps that serve nothing)

“I agree that it’s important,” he says. “I would like Sam to explain what happened. But I also don’t see that recriminations are where we need to be directing our energy at the moment. Considering that what’s done is done” —He meets Quackity’s gaze as steadily as he can, meets his gaze and brings all the weight of their history to bear, from the debate floor to the podium and the stage to the dark caverns of the rebellion— “and going through all of the ways that everyone in this room has fucked everyone else over hardly seems like the best use of our time.”

He knows the statement won’t land like it should. He knows that he of all people has no right to ask for this. But the longer he stands here, the more aware he is of all the bad blood in this room, the more aware he is that this particular group of people is like a powder keg set to explode, that they could all turn on each other and do Dream’s job for him at a poorly placed jab or threat. The air is thick with the complicated web that binds them all.

(betrayals and lives taken and homes destroyed and even the bedrock of a once stable foundation shaken and torn up)

“Well, that’s kind of a convenient stance to take,” Quackity shoots back, and it’s precisely the response he expected “considering what *you* did.”

“I’m aware,” he says, drowning out the way that Tommy audibly starts to protest. “I think my point still stands, though. Unless you really think now is the time to air out everyone’s dirty laundry. I’m sure Dream would find it entertaining, at least.”

(the words taste like ash and he feels like a hypocrite but he can’t let them see how off balance he is can’t let them know because a leader is needed and he could step aside and let someone else take the position but that has always been a weakness of his, his need for control, so even when the control is slipping he grasps it with both hands and hangs on to it with all his worth whether it’s wise or not because someone needs to lead and he does not trust himself but he trusts others even less and he has always been one to take on the responsibility even when he ought not to even when)

Quackity breathes in and out, eyes narrow.

“Alright,” he says. “No, you’re right.” He steps up to the table as well, pulling out a chair for himself, though he doesn’t yet sit. He also, Wilbur notes, does not apologize to Sam, but that’s not a requirement, even though the way Puffy is glaring suggests that she would like it to be.

“Wait,” someone says, and Wilbur starts, looking to—*George*, and how did he not realize George was here, too? Perhaps because he’s been quiet. Quieter than the norm, though he can’t say that he’s ever known George all that well. Or perhaps it’s just a surprise to see him around. “Is he in charge?” George continues. “Why is he in charge?” He sounds genuinely confused more than upset, but he still feels his hackles raise.

(he is placing himself in this position and it feels natural and right and feels wrong and unsteady like his footing is slipping like he’s on the edge of the cliff face and below the rockslide is starting but he can do this, he can, he can lead this, it’s just one meeting and he can do it because if not him then who else will and he can do it)

“I’m not ‘in charge,’” he

(lies? he doesn’t know doesn’t know)

says. “I’m just trying to get a meeting started. We’re all here, aren’t we?”

“Everyone we were able to find is in this room,” Eret says softly, and then, to everyone else. “And I agree with Wilbur. We need to plan out our next move. And seeing as a meeting table has been provided—” They gesture, rather pointedly, and Puffy is the first to nod, pulling out a seat and all but collapsing into it, running a hand through her hair. Sam is next, and then Tommy and Tubbo enter fully, situating themselves directly to his right. Phil is the next to approach, followed by Techno and Ranboo, and he does not miss the way Quackity’s eyes track Techno’s movements.

Before long, it’s just him and Quackity standing. A concession might be needed here, or at least, a show of one; he doesn’t actually want to cause too much conflict with the man, if it

can be avoided, not right this second, so he tilts his head slightly and sits in a chair of his own, though carefully, so as not to slump into it. Sitting seems to make him realize just how tired he still is, and the urge to let himself sag is strong. But the ploy works; Quackity seats himself, Sapnap on one side and George on the other, and really, this has to be one of the strangest collections of allies to have ever existed.

It reminds him of the final days of the rebellion, a little bit. The way that so many flocked to their banner to depose Schlatt. It's difficult to look back on, but that aspect of it, at least, is not entirely tainted. There was a sense of camaraderie among them that is not quite present here, but he doesn't miss it for himself; in those days, too, he held himself apart, struggling to resolve himself to what he was going to do, knowing too well that the traitor they all feared existed was him.

But there's people here who weren't here then. And people here then who are missing now.

"Who couldn't be found?" he asks, and it is Puffy who answers first.

"Niki," she says, and his heart skips several beats, unprepared for that answer, though its truth is undeniable. "I tried, but we only had so much time, and I have no idea where she's been staying these days. There also wasn't time to get to Foolish, but he lives a long way out, so he's probably fine."

It is a struggle not to react outwardly. Niki. He hadn't even thought to—

No. Now isn't the time.

(even though he wronged her, too, wronged her as he wronged everyone else and she deserved so much better than what he could give her and she is a dear friend so dear that even Ghostbur always remembered her but it seems that in the midst of everything else he might have failed her again and she deserves a thousand apologies and all the atonement he can offer but now he may never get that chance, may never and now is not the time to focus on it but oh gods *Niki*)

"Jack Manifold, too," Tubbo chimes in. "He was staying in Snowchester, but I haven't seen him in a while."

"Karl's gone," Quackity says. "But he does that a lot, so that might not necessarily mean anything." His voice is too strained to be causal, and Wilbur has to make an effort not to react to that, too, though for an entirely different reason. He's not sure how much Quackity knows. Not sure how much he should say, if anything at all.

(but he has seen Karl bargain with a god has seen the universe cling to him has seen the way he sidesteps in and out of reality and through time to the places inbetween and he would not have thought it of Karl of all people but perhaps that is the point)

"Hannah," Sam offers, and nothing else. It's not a name he knows.

"That might be everybody, though," Sapnap says. "Alyssa and Callahan are long gone, and people like Vikkstar and Lazar haven't been around for a while, now. Or, wait, actually, I

have no idea where Hbomb is.”

“And there’s Purpled, too,” George says around a yawn. “No clue what he’s been up to these days, but he was always pretty close to Punz.”

“Oh, yeah, and the vines were all over his UFO,” Puffy agrees. “Um, and we might want to add Skeppy onto that. I have no clue where he is, but I’d be surprised if he weren’t Team Egg, since Bad is.”

There is a moment of silence.

“Is that actually everybody, then?” George says. “That’s more people than I thought.”

“It could be worse,” Phil says. His head is tilted back, eyes tracing the ceiling, though Wilbur knows him better than to think he’s actually relaxed. “We know about Dream, and BadBoyHalo, Antfrost, Ponk, and Punz. It’s a maybe on Niki, Jack Manifold, Hbomb, Skeppy, Karl—”

“Not Karl,” Quackity insists, and Wilbur is inclined to agree with that much, at least, even while Phil presses on.

“—Purpled, and—Hannah, did you say? And possibly Foolish, since we don’t know, but I’m inclined to agree with Puffy that he’s probably alright. So absolute worst-case scenario, that’s twelve, *maybe* thirteen people we’re up against. Pretty even odds.”

Phil’s definition of even odds, he thinks, is slightly skewed.

“Yeah, except you’re forgetting that the Egg is a demon. Dreamon, whatever. And Dream is also a demon, kind of,” Sapnap says. “That doesn’t sound even to me.”

“He’s still homeless,” Techno murmurs.

“The fuck does it matter if he’s homeless?” Quackity snaps, and then visibly quails when Technoblade looks at him, even though it’s also obvious that he’s trying not to. History there that he’s not privy to, perhaps, and he’s hardly going to bring it up right now.

“Well, I mean, we’ve already—” Fundy tries to speak up, but he’s drowned out by about four other people trying to weigh in on whether Dream’s homelessness has any bearing on the conversation, and Wilbur takes a second to frown at Techno for the hornet’s nest he’s kicked up, and by that time, Puffy’s speaking again.

(it’s fine, it’s still under control, he has this under control, it’s fine, and so what if he’s running on too few hours of sleep and so what if he wants to set his head down on the table and stay there, because he’s not about to actually do that, and it’s fine, he’s fine, it’s all fine)

“What about you guys?” she says, and everyone else falls quieter. “You were looking for dreamon-related stuff, right? Did you find anything? Honestly, we weren’t sure that you guys would be back this soon.”

“Is that where you went?” Schlatt asks. “How the fuck did that lead to you antagonizing a god?”

He ignores him, still. It’s the only option, really. “We went through as many of the stronghold’s” —There are several exclamations at that, at the fact that they know where one of the server’s strongholds is, as well as a sigh from Phil, no doubt an objection to spreading that tidbit around, but he continues— “books as we could, but we didn’t find anything. I did attempt to provoke a god into helping us, so we’ll see if that pans out at all, but I wouldn’t call it a wasted trip. I also managed to confirm for sure that the Egg is a dreamon, but I think we pretty much knew that.”

There is another moment of complete silence.

“I’m sorry, you did what now?” Quackity asks, and from where he’s drifting behind him, Schlatt starts cackling, loud and extremely irritating, a wheezy undertone to it that makes no sense considering that he does not need to breathe.

“I attempted to provoke a god into helping us,” he repeats. “I’m not sure whether I succeeded or not—in the helping area, at least. They were very provoked. But—” He pauses, considering. It’s always a tricky game, figuring out what to say and what to keep close to the chest, but this case is harder than most. “Actually, Sapnap and George, I’d like to ask, were you aware that Dream is a god? Or was a god?”

He is predicting the chaos that erupts after that, all exclamations and incoherent sounds, most of them some variation on either “What?” or “Fuck!” or some combination of both. But he keeps his gaze flickering between George and Sapnap, measuring their reactions. George’s face goes blank—shock, he thinks, rather than the expression of someone being caught out. And Sapnap’s jaw drops slightly.

“Dream’s not a god,” he says, and his voice overrides everyone else’s. “Dream’s not—there’s no way he could’ve kept that from us. Absolutely no way.”

“He’s not now,” he agrees. “He separated himself from the vast majority of his power, somehow, when he realized he’d be corrupted by the remnants of the dreamon. But he was one. I’m sure of that much. He may have hidden it from you, but I am certain of it.”

Sapnap’s face reddens.

“Aw, I think you hurt his feelings, Wilbur,” Schlatt says.

“Dream’s not a god,” Sapnap says again. “He’s not.”

“Even if he is, what does it matter?” Fundy says suddenly. “Especially if he’s not one now. It’s the dreamons that we have to deal with. The Egg, and whatever’s left in Dream. So if we don’t have anything that can take care of that, then what the fuck is all of this for? We have nothing.”

“Weird time for the kid to grow a spine,” Schlatt comments, and he’s ignoring him, he’s *ignoring* him, even though the vitriol in his son’s voice hits like a knife driven through

stitches, back into a wound not yet healed. Fundy's not looking at him, and the avoidance only makes it worse.

(it is directed at you it has to be it has to be that it is directed at you and it hurts hurts hurts and there is no one to blame but yourself and it hurts and you're so tired and you have to stay in control but it hurts)

A hand touches his. He glances down to find that he's clenched them, that his knuckles are white and his palms are stinging from the bite of his fingernails in his flesh, and Tommy has placed his hand on his, watching him. It is an effort to relax even a little bit, but for Tommy's sake, he manages it.

Tubbo clears his throat. "What Fundy is getting at, I think, is that even with the stuff that me and Fundy have, it won't be enough to kill them. Maybe we could banish the Egg, but apparently the exorcism we used on Dream wasn't entirely effective, so we can't be sure of that much. So maybe we're not quite at square one, still, but we haven't gotten that far. And if we can't beat the dreamons, we can't beat the Egg. Since the Egg is a dreamon." He shrugs. "We've managed to keep it out. And as long as none of us break the enchantments from the inside, we should be fine to hold out here. But in the way of attacks, we don't have much."

"Great," Quackity says. "So where the fuck does that leave us, then?"

He narrows his eyes at the table, attempting to collect his thoughts, and then looks back up. "I think we're getting a bit off track," he says. "Sam, is there anything that you can remember from the moment that Dream broke out that you think might be relevant?"

He tries to keep his voice, if not gentle, then at least free of blame, perhaps because he sees what Quackity apparently doesn't; there is nothing he could say that would assign more fault than Sam has already assigned to himself. His eyes are dark, shadowed, and what skin is visible above the lines of his mask is pale and gaunt. It's only been two days, little though that seems possible, but Sam appears as though he hasn't eaten or slept for a week. Frankly, Wilbur hopes that he's not planning to join in the fight that is sure to be on the horizon; he hardly looks as if he could effectively wield a sword. He is a far cry from the confident, stoic warden he met in the prison a few weeks ago.

"I don't know," Sam says, voice half a moan. "I think—I didn't go in his cell. I know that for sure. I'd have no reason to. I didn't go in, and the lava wasn't lowered, so somehow, he escaped despite that. Which doesn't make any sense, since the prison was designed to cut people off from any extraneous powers that they might otherwise have access to, and that includes admin abilities." He stops for a second. The table has fallen silent again, though this time, there is a certain anticipation to it, a horror. Even Quackity looks considering rather than outraged. "I didn't see him coming. He stabbed right through my armor. And I don't—maybe it's related to the demon thing. Or maybe—Wilbur, you said he was a *god*?"

His voice rises in pitch on the last sentence, cracks a bit on the last word, and Wilbur is suddenly reminded that Sam, like Sapnap and George, has known Dream for a very long time. Known Dream for a very long time and somehow, not known this.

“He was,” he says. “I don’t know how much of that power he still has. Not much, I’d imagine, but in combination with demonic corruption, perhaps that doesn’t matter. And in any case, it’s not something you would have known to plan for.”

“Wait,” Schlatt says, “is that why he could see me? Wilbur, what does it mean that he could see me? Does that mean something?”

He blinks. That—might actually be a good point. One that he hasn’t thought about in some time, though where he fits that into the mess of puzzle pieces spread out before him, he has no idea.

“So we’re back to square one there as well,” Phil says.

“Then I’ll reiterate, where the *fuck* does this leave us?” Quackity says. “We’ve been doing a whole lot of talking here, but not a whole lot of actual planning. Does anybody actually have an idea of what to do, or are we going around in circles?”

“I don’t see you offering much of anything either,” Eret points out.

“Yeah, ‘cause I don’t know what the fuck is happening!” Quackity shoots back. “At least I can admit that instead of yanking everyone around pretending like I know what I’m doing!”

That is a barb, probably, but Quackity isn’t even looking at him, is glaring at Eret, and this is about to erupt into another argument, and he thinks he’s going to allow it to, because even laying out all the information available to them isn’t getting them anywhere, and even if he had the ability to impose control over the room, there is still a part of him that whispers, that cries out that he does not have the right, and any moment now they will decide that punishing him for his crimes should be higher on the list of priorities, especially if he tries to step back into his old role, and—he’s not nearly as over this as he hoped he was, is he?

(he forgot how to trust a long time ago and perhaps these fears are baseless but that makes them no less potent and he forgot how to trust a long time ago he cannot trust them he cannot and he holds none of his former power not even that which was rightfully his he holds none of it and he cannot trust)

(he can control this he can lead but)

(but he)

(he’s supposed to be)

(a question, one that you do not want to confront: were you ever in control?)

So he lets them. He lets them talk over each other. Even Tommy joins in after a moment, after a sideways glance and another squeeze of his hand, and he can’t even pay attention to what everyone is saying.

It is difficult to keep his shoulders erect. There is a weight trying to bring his head down to his chest. It’s just an argument, and he can hardly expect anything less from these people, so

bitter have the tides of history turned between them all, but it feels like a failure on his part, and his thoughts are fracturing again, flying beyond his grasp.

“Wil,” Phil murmurs next to him, but he just shakes his head.

“Yeah, this is going great,” Schlatt says. “Good job with the meeting. Y’know, when I was in charge, I didn’t let any of this happen. I ruled with an iron fist. People listened to me. They respected me.”

“And then you died in a drug van,” he says, “from a heart attack, surrounded by people who hated you.”

This gets him an extraordinarily strange glance from Phil, but no one else is paying attention. He can’t keep track of who is snapping at who, but they’re all snapping at each other. In a way, Schlatt is right; the peace lasted, what, ten minutes at most?

Schlatt is silent.

Fundy is looking at him, too. He doesn’t look back. He doesn’t want to read the expression on his face. He doesn’t want—

“Wait,” Schlatt says suddenly, “wait, fuck, do you feel that?” He sounds genuinely alarmed, for once, and after a second, Wilbur feels it too, feels

(the air in the room alight and alive and their voices waver in and out of tune with the underlying melody and the regard lies heavily on them all and the universe is always there is always with you in the back of your mind but it is leaning in closer leaning in over your shoulder and you feel)

the way the atmosphere shifts. His ears fill with white noise. Everyone is still arguing, and they need to stop, but he can’t force the words out. Beside him, Phil jolts. Tommy grips his hand tighter. He doesn’t know if they’re saying anything, can’t hear anything past the ringing.

(a realization, dim and far too late: he really should have tried to get some more sleep)

Schlatt curses. He can hear that, for some reason, loud and clear. And then, he becomes aware of the tether again, aware that the tether is being pulled, is being yanked on, a burst of energy departing from him, energy that he’s fairly sure he might not actually have to give, and—

“Hey, could you all just shut up for two fucking seconds?” Schlatt says, voice almost causal, strong, no longer echoing, and the static clears from his mind and ears, and the room is once again quiet. His hands have begun to shake, and the tether is pulling on his heart, he thinks. He doesn’t have to turn to know that Schlatt stands behind his chair, solid as anything.

His heart is literally fluttering. That might not be good.

“What,” Quackity says, “the fuck.”

And he doesn’t say anything else. Because the god appears, then, hovering over the meeting table, cloak fluttering without wind, twin halos circling their head, and it’s interesting, that he

can see those now without straining his mind. The space under their hood no longer appears full of shadows, but rather of the universe itself, a darkness that is not empty, starstuff swirling just out of view.

“Oh, shit, that actually is a god,” Schlatt mutters.

He hears the humming. It bolsters him, a bit, boosts his flagging strength. He takes in a deep breath, and his heart calms, steadies.

He focuses.

“Is hovering over tables the only way you know how to make an entrance?” he asks.

The god’s hood swings his way.

“I asked the universe,” they say. “The universe did not refuse.”

“What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck,” Quackity is muttering under his breath. Eret is staring, jaw slack. Puffy has grabbed onto Sam’s arm. The reactions on his side of the table are less pronounced; Phil and Ranboo have seen the god before, Techno is not one to be impressed without what he considers due reason, and Tommy refuses to be cowed on general principle, though he does hear him and Tubbo both let out a, “Holy shit,” under their breaths, almost in unison.

But Sapnap has risen to his feet, eyes wide.

And George says, “Dream?” His voice does not waver. He sounds curious, confused. Perhaps hopeful.

The god actually seems to still, the motion of their cloak dying down as they turn away from Wilbur and toward the other side of the table.

“Once,” they say, and Wilbur is surprised that they’re answering at all, to be honest. “No longer.” They pause. “He loved you. May yet still, under the corruption that has taken him. I am sorry.”

The god does not know human emotions. The god is not a person in their own right, not really; they are built of the power of a god and little else. But somehow, Wilbur almost believes that they mean it.

Sapnap makes a gasping sound, like air tried to escape his lungs but got caught in his throat. George has sat up straighter in his seat, his whole body leaning toward where the god is hovering. His hands rest on the table, palms facing upward, as if in invitation.

If it is one, the god does not take it.

(DreamXD, Karl called the god, DreamXD, Dream XD, Dream Xed, Dream crossed out, Dream but not, and perhaps this is the cruelest thing he could have done to these two, inviting a facsimile of their friend to hover in front of them, a reminder of what they lost and are not

likely to ever have again, because this god could never hope to replace the man that Wilbur remembers from the beginning, the Dream that used to be and will likely never be again)

“I asked the universe,” the god says again, and turns back toward him. “The universe did not refuse. The universe sees you, and the universe would reply.” They pause, allowing that declaration to simmer in the air for a moment. Their voice echoes, and he can hear in that echo the overlay of the song, the tune, the notes that the stars hum reverberating in the world’s atoms. “If I alone were strong enough to exorcise this corruption, he would have done so when we were whole. But you have met with the universe, and the universe would aid me, so that I might aid you.”

His attention is fixed on them. But in his peripheral vision, he sees Sapnap slump back into his seat, face contorted.

(yes, this is the cruelest thing he could have done, bringing their dearest friend’s mirror reflection here)

“And what—” He stops. Wets his lips. His mouth is dry. “And what aid would that be?”

The folds of their cloak stir. A hand emerges, and the hand, too, is darkness-that-is-the-universe, and it is not connected to any arm that he can see. Their fingers splay wide, and then dropping from the air and onto the table, there are two swords. On first glance, they seem to have been forged from diamonds, sparkling blue in the throne room’s flickering firelight, but there are runes crawling up and down the blades and hilts, runes that seem to squirm and dance and shift.

And the runes are lit with starlight. He’s not sure that anyone else can see it. But he knows.

(the runes hum)

“The void is not so easily subsumed,” the god says, “and it is from the void that the corruption comes. But the void is part of the universe even as it exists outside of the universe. Corruption can be destroyed.” The hand gestures to the swords, now lying beneath them on the table. “With great effort, but the universe has joined me in it. These are the result.”

“I’ve never seen runes like those before,” Tubbo breathes, eyes wide. He leans forward, apparently overcoming his wariness. “These can—these can kill a dreamon? Like, actually?”

“The blow must be lethal,” the god says. “But the corruption can be destroyed. You asked me for help. This is all I can offer you.”

“It’s far better than nothing,” he says, and pauses, just to hear the hum, now coming from multiple sources, the swords and the god alike. “Thank you.”

“Do not fail,” the god says, and under any other circumstance, Wilbur might laugh at the words, so stereotypical, like something out of a television show. *Do not fail*. As if he plans to, as if he would without this prompting. “Do not allow this to be in vain.”

The world folds around them. The air compresses. Just as they appeared, they are vanish again, the only sign of their presence the swords that still glimmer before them all. The atmosphere lightens, the sensation of being watched easing away, like storm clouds dissipating. The god is truly gone, then, and staring at the blades, he's not sure what to feel. He supposes that he hoped for more, somehow, hoped that the god would have the power to solve the issue for them, that if he could just persuade them to act then their troubles would go away. But it makes sense that they can't; if the god's power were enough to destroy a dreamon, then Dream wouldn't have been possessed in the first place, and none of this would be happening at all.

This is the second best thing. The universe itself has interceded.

(and it's such a strange thought is something that he never would have thought plausible because the universe does not interfere the universe watches and waits but he has been there in the cradle of the cosmos and felt them watching heard them whisper the stars and the space between and they watch but they watch with love and the universe has not fixed their problems has not made them magically disappear but it has given the means to do it themselves and upon further reflection that is like the universe that is very like the universe and perhaps what it has given them is hope)

"Well, that was enlightnin'," Techno drawls. "So glad we got all of that cleared up. Can I have one of those fancy swords, or do we need to have a whole argument about this, too?"

"Why the *fuck* are you being so calm about this?" Quackity says. "Why the fuck—what the fuck even was—and *you*!" He stands, the motion quick and sharp, and he throws an accusing finger in his—no, in Schlatt's direction, because the god is gone and he can feel his heart fluttering again, his energy tugged away from him at a rate that should perhaps be considered alarming, and he can sense Schlatt's presence behind him, solid and breathing. "How are you here, you're dead, you are so fucking dead, I ate your fucking heart that's how dead you are, I literally own your, your *leg* bones, I have your femurs, how are you here, and can you just die again, right now?"

"Aw, did you miss me, honey bear?" Schlatt says.

"*No*, I hate your fucking guts, I hate you so fucking much, you are—" And he keeps going, and Sapnap has shaken himself out of his stupor enough to glare daggers at—shit, at his fiancée's ex-husband, and that's a bit messy, isn't it? And absolutely no one at the table appears pleased that Schlatt is here, even though several people seem to be too focused on absorbing what's just happened with the literal god to be too concerned at the sudden reappearance of a former dictator, but Quackity continues and Schlatt eggs him on, and Tubbo is a few seats down, swiveled in his chair and staring at Schlatt with an expression that's impossible to determine

(but that he doesn't like, doesn't like the mix of hope and fear and want and disgust, doesn't like it at all)

and it's all too much, and his chest hurts. Like it's too tight. Like his lungs aren't inflating.

(Schlatt died of a heart attack hated and alone even surrounded as he was he was alone and he died of a heart attack of a)

He glances around the table one last time, hoping for some indication that somebody, anybody, wants this conversation to get back on track. Instead, his gaze lands on Fundy, who is watching Schlatt with shock and open anticipation but very little anger, and somehow, that is what does it, what sends everything boiling over, the fact that his son is looking at Schlatt with a more welcoming expression than he greeted him with.

(and he deserves it he deserves it he knows but)

He never had control here. He has to face that.

He yanks at the tether, pulls with what little strength he has left, and the flow of energy halts, and Schlatt goes translucent mid-sentence.

“Just to be transparent, the bastard’s always around,” he says into the silence, rising from his seat, blinking black spots from his vision. His own voice sounds distant, but clear, at least. “But he literally has to draw from my lifeforce to do that, so that’s enough for now, I think. Please direct your complaints to the empty air rather than me, as I have very little say in where he decides to go poking around, and I probably agree with all of your objections to his general everything in any case.” He leans against the table, and tries not to make it obvious that that’s what’s keeping him upright. “I suggest we conclude our discussion for now, and come back in a few hours to actually formulate a plan based on our new resources.”

He gives it a second, but only waits for one person—Puffy, he thinks, though his vision is swimming—to nod, hesitantly, before turning on his heel and leaving the room. Going anywhere. Anywhere else.

(you lost control of them and you’re losing control of yourself and how long until you have to admit that you never had control in the first place that you claim to be better but don’t even know what that means that the paint really is scraping off and once it’s all gone there will be no more lying to yourself and then where will you be, Wilbur, where will you be)

No one stops him. A few people call out. Schlatt—sounding irritated, but that’s *tough*; he’s going to have to deal with it—and Tommy, and Phil.

He took a few minutes before the meeting began. To compose himself, to relax. That didn’t work, so he’ll take a few hours. And then get back to it. There’s no choice otherwise, after all. No real rest until this nightmare is over with, whenever that may be.

He ignores the voice that whispers that he’s not going to make it that far. He’s pushed through times like this before.

He can do it again.

I am never writing something where I have to deal with fourteen characters at the same time ever again (/lh). That's too many characters at once. But on the bright side, or not, depending on how you look at it, events are about to start heating up very soon. In fact, if you'll allow me to say it... we're in the endgame now. :)

As always, thank you so much for your feedback; it really keeps me going when my motivation starts to flag. Come stop by [my tumblr](#) if you'd like!

Next up, Chapter Eighteen: In which Wilbur's sat down and had real conversations with everyone in his family but Phil, at this point, so it's about time that changed. They've each got a few truths that the other needs to hear.

quiet now

Chapter Notes

I'm currently out of town, so I was worried I wouldn't be able to post this one lmao. But here it is! Enjoy!! :D

Chapter content warnings for swearing, description of injury, scars, references to past suicide, mild suicidal ideation, and discussion of c!Wilbur's overall terrible mental health.

(And uh... might have to tack a cliffhanger warning onto all of that, too. Nothing too bad, but. Definitely there.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They do come up with a plan. A simple one, as far as plans go, but that means less moving parts, less things to go wrong. Sometimes a simpler plan is better. And considering the effort it takes to get them all there, to get them all on the same page, he'll accept it. But night has fallen by the time they figure it all out,

(and by that time his throat is hoarse and his hands are shaking so he shoves them into his pockets and Tommy keeps shooting him looks and Phil is doing the same and Techno is kind of hovering a bit but he ignores them because he's fine and he keeps his shoulders straight his shoulders straight set and straight so that no one looks at him and sees his exhaustion the way he's crumbling and he tells himself that he's not and that he's alright that this is nothing but he's not sure he believes himself anymore and that in itself is terrifying because if he's not alright then he has to confront the dark confront what he does not want to confront so he tells himself he's alright but the walls are cracking they're *cracking*)

so they'll set it all in motion in the morning. For now, they retire to bed. Almost all of them; Eret says she'll keep watch by the gates. Once, he wouldn't have trusted her word. He's not sure that he does, even now. But he doesn't object, and neither does anyone else, so.

It's night. He should sleep. He is even aware that he *needs* to sleep, that he's been dealing with a pounding headache ever since just after the last time he let Schlatt materialize, that every so often his vision swims for no apparent reason. He needs to sleep, because he's no use to anyone like this, not if he can't wield a weapon, whether physical or verbal, and he used all the rest of his energy on getting through the rest of the meetings. The collaboration. The planning. The *day*, plain and simple.

He knows when he's running on fumes.

Eret gave him a room. She gave everyone a room. Because she has a bloody enormous castle, with rooms to spare. So he's lying in an unfamiliar bed, staring at the ceiling, watching the

moonlight slowly creep in as the clouds outside finally clear, and he can't sleep. Exhaustion grips him with a thousand clinging hands, and he can't sleep. He knows exactly where everyone is, knows that Tommy and Tubbo are sharing the room next to him, that Techno and Phil are on this same hall, and he even made sure to locate Fundy despite—everything.

Everyone is safe, in this moment, at least. But he can't sleep, can't give his body the rest it's demanding of him. His mind is contorting in on itself, itching, buzzing, like a swarm of bees that can't find the home hive. And his thoughts, as have been their wont lately, slip away before he can examine them properly.

(or perhaps he's letting them go, has been letting them go all along, because he does not want to look at them, does not want to understand, because he wants to achieve that nebulous concept of being *better* but if he looks at himself too closely then he will have to acknowledge that being better doesn't only have the meaning he's assigned to the phrase, doesn't just mean being better to others but also to)

He can't sleep. So he gets up. Steadies himself against the bed's banister until the world stops spinning. And then goes out into the hall. The stone is lit with flickering torches, and the soft crackling of the fire is the only sound. He slips out quietly, footsteps light on the carpet, and just walks. To the end of the hallway, glancing back just once, and—

Schlatt is at the other end. Staring at him. He stares back.

And then the ghost shakes his head and vanishes. The glimmer of blue is still there, still present as a shimmer if he doesn't look at the spot directly, but the message is clear. Schlatt doesn't want to talk.

He doesn't particularly want to talk, either. Not after the mess that today has been. He regrets laying out all of his cards in front of Schlatt in the way that he did. The fact that Schlatt now knows how to make himself solid only adds to that. He's not fond of the sensation, of his strength leaving him in a rush, pulled away from him without his consent.

(and his heart constricting in his chest)

The ground tilts a bit. He places his hands against the wall, and the dizziness passes. He keeps going. Keeps stalking through the halls.

He's done this before. He felt like the castle's passages were haunted, then, a few days ago. He still feels the same. Especially now, at night, when the whole castle is still. When he might as well be the only person alive.

(if he is that)

Except then, he rounds a corner and nearly runs over Ranboo. Or rather, doesn't run him over, exactly, because Ranboo is exceedingly tall, and he somehow seems even taller now. But it's him, his skin divided in black and white, wearing that suit he always seems to have on. Wilbur remembers to avert his eyes before meeting his gaze, but not before catching the fact that Ranboo's are glowing purple. Which is different from usual. Definitely different from usual.

“Wasn’t expecting anyone else to be up,” he says, backing up a step. He fixes his gaze past Ranboo’s shoulder and tries to observe him surreptitiously.

Ranboo is holding a block of dirt. Grass intact. Interesting.

And then, Ranboo chirps at him. An enderman sort of warble, distorted and yet, somehow, gentle.

“Um,” he says. “Are you—is this the sleepwalking thing again?”

Immediately afterward, he realizes the stupidity of asking a sleepwalking person whether or not they’re sleepwalking. But the eyes are new, for sure; in the Egg’s chamber, when he was sleepwalking before, his eyes were just like they’d been previously, one red and one green, just glazed over.

His eyes now aren’t glazed at all, are bright and alert. But purple.

Ranboo vwoops.

“Alright, you know what, good for you,” he says. “I’m just going to keep walking. Maybe you should get some rest later or something.”

It’s not any of his concern what Ranboo’s doing. As long as he’s staying in the castle, he can sleepwalk and be an enderman to his heart’s content. It’s none of his business, and if he really feels the need, he’ll go get Phil. Since Phil seems to be halfway to adopting him in any case. Let Phil deal with it.

So he moves to walk around Ranboo. Except Ranboo mirrors him, and suddenly, the grass block is being shoved against his chest. Lightly, but enough to stop him in his tracks.

“Um,” he says again. Not up to his usual standards of eloquence, but Ranboo likely won’t remember this later if he actually is sleepwalking, so it’s fine. “You want me to take it? Is that it?”

Ranboo vwoops, still holding the block out at him, so he reaches for it, curling his fingers into the dirt. Ranboo releases the block as soon as he does, and the dirt immediately starts to come loose, to lose its shape, and a good bit of the grass starts to fall off. But Ranboo nods in satisfaction, letting out another warble, so he keeps hold of it as best he can. At least until Ranboo has passed by him, evidently content with whatever he thinks he’s accomplished. Wilbur turns to stare at his retreating back until he’s vanished around the corner.

And then he looks down at his hands. At the block, which barely resembles a block anymore. Mostly just a lump of dirt.

“Right,” he mutters, letting it slide through his fingers. Some of it clings to his skin, and he wrinkles his nose, brushing his hands against his coat.

He’s not sure what that was. But alright.

He finds his way out into the open air, eventually, climbing up and up until he gets to the roof of the castle. The sky above is lit with stars, and if he tilts his head and closes his eyes, he can hear them. Humming, always humming. Or perhaps he's imagining it, his brain filling in a sound he can't truly hear but that he knows is present. He's not sure it makes a difference either way. It's still a comfort. A small one, but a comfort nonetheless.

He's considering whether to try to sleep up here instead when he sees that Phil is here too. A little off to the side, a dark silhouette staring out over the SMP, sitting on a stone bench. Why Eret put a bench on the roof, he has no idea; or perhaps Phil made it himself. He wouldn't be surprised.

He should probably leave him be. And yet, he doesn't want to go back inside, and—

Phil really ought to be resting too.

So he crosses the rooftop, slowly, almost reluctantly as he picks his way across the stone. He hesitates before sitting next to Phil on the bench, leaving a bit of space between them. This close, he can see the bags under Phil's eyes better than ever, as well as the way his cloak twitches as the wings underneath move.

"Any particular reason why you're up?" he asks. Phil doesn't act surprised at his appearance; he knew he was there, then. Heard his approach, most likely, or perhaps just sensed his presence. Hundreds of years have made Phil a difficult man to catch off guard.

(though you did it once, in a different way, in that room, you caught him off guard and broke him in the catching)

Phil snorts. "Nightmare," he says, clipped, though Wilbur is somewhat surprised to have gotten even that admission out of him. "I should be asking the same of you. You need to get some fucking sleep, Wilbur."

"I'm well aware," he says. "I've been trying. Thought a walk might clear my head." He hesitates, not sure that he should push any further, not sure that he wants to, that Phil would welcome it. But then, he's never been one to let such a small detail as whether his prying is *welcome* stop him. "Can I ask what about?" he asks, and is satisfied with that. If Phil wants him to fuck off, then he'll tell him so.

But Phil is silent for a moment.

"You, usually," he says.

"Oh," Wilbur replies.

He didn't expect that. But he feels like he should have.

Phil shifts, then, his clothing rustling as he turns to half face him.

"I didn't mean it that way," he says. "It's not your fault. You get as old as I am and you pick up a few recurring nightmares. Persistent little fucks, but it's not anything to be worried about."

But this one is bad enough to cost you sleep on the eve of battle, and I know you know better than to let that happen, so it must be bad, he doesn't say. But this one is about me, he doesn't say. But there is still an uncomfortable tightness in his chest, one that doesn't let up no matter how deeply he breathes. So he doesn't look at Phil, but he says, "Tell me about it?" and immediately curses the weakness of his voice. He almost sounds scared, which is not what he was aiming for. Inviting, maybe. He wants to know.

(he doesn't, actually, but he feels like he should, so it's the same thing in the end)

Phil sighs.

"We're on a cliff, you and I," he says, sounding tired. "There's an ocean below us, far down. Neither of us speak. You throw a sword down at my feet, and I—I do it. Just like I did. And then, you smile at me and fall backward. Off the cliff." He looks down at his hands, flexing his fingers. "I jump after you. And then I remember that I can't fly."

Wilbur swallows.

(he has no trouble conflating himself with a nightmare, no trouble at all, but it becomes more difficult when the nightmare is not him but rather *losing* him and he should have expected as much from Phil because Phil for all his long years has never been good at letting go at giving up on something that cannot be saved but he still doesn't know what to do with this what to say)

"I thought falling from a cliff was a Theseus thing," he manages.

Phil chuckles dryly. "Techno does like his myths," he says, "but life's not so cut and dry as those are. Not everything has a perfect parallel. We're not storybook characters."

It's not a pointed comment. But his mind still cringes away from the words.

"But stories come from somewhere," he says softly. It's not a plea, because he doesn't have anything to plead, but if that's so, then he doesn't know why his voice is lined with desperation, all of a sudden, why his heart is thumping against his ribcage. "Even in real life, we all have roles to play."

"Is that what you've been doing, Wil?" Phil asks. "Playing a role?"

His breath catches, snags in his lungs, like his chest is full of thorns.

(you do not like to be seen do not like to be perceived not like this not in a way that lays out the heart of you your core beliefs those are for you and you alone and you guard them so no one else knows and they receive only what you choose to present and so you do not like this at all do not like to be known beyond what you have explicitly chosen to share)

(you have always been a showman)

"I don't know what you mean," he says, but it's stiff, too stiff, and Phil is too perceptive a man to be fooled by it.

“I’ve noticed what you’re doing,” Phil says. “You’re running yourself ragged trying to pull everyone together. To direct them. And I know you’re a leader, Wil, I really do, and you’re damn good at it, too, but you can’t possibly believe that wearing yourself out like this is healthy.”

He shuts his eyes. “It’s not like that,” he says. “I’m just doing what needs to be done.”

“It needs to be done. But not necessarily by you, mate. A lot of the people here are more than capable of taking on some of the responsibility. Your brothers included. Also, you didn’t answer my question.”

“I didn’t hear you ask one,” he snaps, sudden irritation welling up. “It’s not a matter of health, Phil! It’s a matter of what’s important, and what’s important right now is dealing with all of this bullshit. That has to come first.”

Phil sits up straighter. His hands grip his knees, and his eyebrows draw together.

“You come first,” Phil says. “You always come first. Your health *is* important, and you—you can’t take care of anyone else before you take care of yourself. Wil, how long have you—”

He cuts off, but Wilbur knows what he was about to ask. *How long have you thought like this?* Or something like that, anyway. This is another thing that he should have expected from Phil, this persistent concern for him. It’s unnecessary, since he

(decided long ago that his health could fall on his list of priorities so long as he was effective, so long as he was getting things done, and he did get things done, in his country, in his exile, he got things done and that was what mattered because he himself has always been so much less important than the things he could create and the things he could do for others)

has matters well in hand, but he doubts Phil would understand if he tried to explain it.

(easier to tell himself that than to admit that he can’t explain it at all, that no explanation he could give would hold up to a moment’s scrutiny, that Phil will see right through it to the real underlying cause, and Phil has already perceived far too much)

“Right, health is important,” he says, placating. “I didn’t mean to imply that it wasn’t. Though, honestly, you’re one to talk. Did you think I didn’t see the state your wings are in? When’s the last time you bothered to preen them?”

It’s a low blow, and he regrets the words as soon as they leave his mouth. Phil flinches, his face setting in a harder expression. More closed off, and he really should have known better, shouldn’t he? Should’ve known better than to bring it up like that, because Phil’s wings used to be his pride and joy, and now they’re ruined and it’s his fault to boot, and he can admit that he was looking for a sore spot to hit, but that wound is far worse than a sore spot.

“Sorry,” he murmurs. “I’m sorry.” He looks away, unable to meet Phil’s eyes, and finds himself looking up again. To the stars.

“It’s alright.” Phil laughs humorlessly. “I can’t say that you’re wrong.” He sighs, posture relaxing slightly. “I caught that, by the way. I know when you’re trying to distract me.” He tilts his head upward, staring at the stars just like Wilbur is, his hat sliding further back on his head. “I’m not trying to lecture you. I just want to understand. Why can’t you let yourself rest, Wil?”

That is a far more complicated question than he knows. That is a question that has its roots in months long past, in a drug van and an idea and a revolution and a nation, in his drive to get recognition and his determination that his country would succeed,

(because if it was not a success then it would be a failure and he too would be a failure)

in sleepless nights spent screaming into his pillow and days pasting on a smile and a confident stride. And then, in relinquishing his power when the people called for it, when he lost, conceding gracefully even as his stomach dropped into his boots, and getting an arrow in his back for his troubles, he and his brother chased like dogs from the home they built. And then, in the ravine, every shadow a threat, every person out to get him, every whisper a lie, every moment settling the despair more deeply into his bones.

But perhaps Phil knows that. Or some of it at least. He doesn’t know how much Phil has guessed. But Phil knows enough to know that the him that he encountered in that room was a far cry from the him that he portrayed in his letters, before he stopped sending them at all, before he could no longer bring himself to pick up the pen, before the thought of lying to his father again left him feeling physically ill, and the idea of telling him the truth was worse.

Phil knows enough to know that something went wrong.

Perhaps a bit of honesty wouldn’t hurt. Perhaps trying to get him to understand wouldn’t hurt. At least, not more than it already does, no more than he already has.

“It’s because I know what I’m like, Phil,” he says softly. “I know what I’m like.”

The stars twinkle at him.

“Okay,” Phil says. Patient. “What does that mean?”

He considers it. Considers everything.

“You know the legacy I left on this server, right?” he says. “You know what I left behind when I died.”

Phil turns his head, looks at him. His expression is slightly pained.

“I sort of destroyed the legacy you left,” he says, and it takes him a second to realize what he’s talking about.

“Not that L’Manberg,” he says. “That L’Manberg wasn’t mine. I suppose it was Tubbo’s more than anything, but it’s hard to say, I think. I can’t really speak on it. Ghostbur—saw things differently than how I would have.” He stops for Phil’s reaction to that, but aside from

a slight narrowing of his eyes, there is nothing. “I mean the original. L’Manberg. My L’Manberg.”

Phil sucks in a sharp breath at his choice of words.

“No, Wil,” he says. “No, I didn’t really get to see it.”

“That’s the point,” he says. He closes his eyes, searching for the right words. The stars are pinprick lights dancing on his eyelids. “I destroyed it. I destroyed it all, Phil. I waffled back and forth a lot, for *weeks*, deciding whether I was going to do it or not. And then I did. I pushed that button, Phil. I made the decision. I destroyed it. I destroyed people’s homes. I betrayed all of my friends. And the thing about that is, even if I regret hurting them, now, I still don’t regret the action itself. I don’t regret destroying it, Phil. It needed to go.” *I needed to go.*

“Why is that, Wil?” Phil asks quietly.

“It wasn’t good anymore,” he answers easily. This, at least, he knows. “It wasn’t—it wasn’t *mine* anymore, either, but mainly it was that it wasn’t good. It became—it became corrupt. Bad. And it was never going to be good again, so it had to stop. It had to end. It all had to end. But that’s not my point right now. My point is that that was my legacy, right? L’Manberg? And I destroyed that, but what’s most important is the pain I caused. That was my legacy. That pain. That was what I left behind me. And even before that, even before everything, when I started it in the first place, I brought war to the server, Phil. Suffering, conflict. And the war was a game at first. We were all friends at the start. But then I decided that it wasn’t a game. I declared independence, and I meant it. So in the end, all of the problems on this server can be traced back to me. Something I did, or something I said.” He leans his head forward again, gazing out at the horizon rather than the night sky. “It all comes back to me. I’ve never been good for this server.”

He pauses, waiting for Phil’s reply. None comes, and he glances over; Phil is staring at him, face white as a sheet.

“I haven’t answered your question yet,” he says. “But you need to—you need to understand all of that so you understand why I feel—” He breaks off. His tongue feels clumsy, and his mind suddenly blanks. He’s not even sure that any of what he’s just said makes sense, and if it doesn’t make sense, then he can’t continue, because if he’s really going to do this, really going to put this all out there for Phil to hear, then he needs it to make sense, needs to be sure that he actually understands.

“Why you feel what?” Phil asks. Still quiet.

He takes in a breath. Tries to gather his thoughts. The exhaustion isn’t helping. It’s like wading through mud.

“I know what I’m like,” he repeats. It makes a good springboard. “So I know that I sure as hell don’t deserve to be back here, even if it had been what I wanted. But I am, so I need to do something that’s worth that. I need to pull myself together and get us all out of this. For Tommy’s sake, if for no one else, and for Tubbo, and—and Fundy, and everyone who doesn’t

deserve to be pulled into this mess. Another mess. If I have the ability to help, then I have a responsibility to do that. I can't just—push it off to someone else, Phil. That's not how it works."

"Why not?" Phil asks.

"Because then *I'm* not worth it, then, am I?" he erupts. Why isn't Phil *getting* this? "Phil, we're all measured by the things we create. By the things we're able to do, our accomplishments. If I can't do anything that's worth something, then what the fuck am I here for? Because it's not because I asked, Phil. I got what I deserved in the end, and that was supposed to be all. I wanted it to be all, Phil, I wanted—"

He cuts off, horror mounting in him. This was a mistake. He never should have said anything at all, never should have started in on this. He should have dodged the questions, the probing comments, until Phil finally got tired and left it alone.

He should have gone back inside.

But Phil still hasn't spoken, so he presses on, trying to wrap it up in a way that's understandable.

"In the end, it all comes down to the fact that I have experience with this kind of stuff," he says. "Someone needs to step up, and I can. So I need to. That's all it is." He scrubs a hand down his face. "I probably should've just skipped to that part."

"No, I'm glad you didn't," Phil says, and there's a tremor in his voice that he can't place the reason for. "I'm glad you—I'm glad you told me this. But—Wil, okay, first off, just because you can do something doesn't mean you should, and it doesn't mean you have to."

"I knew you wouldn't understand it," he mutters. He really ought to go back inside. But the night air is so fresh and clear, smelling of humidity and petrichor, and the thought of returning to that empty, dark room only to stare at the ceiling until morning makes something in him shrivel up and die inside. If he's not going to be able to sleep, then he'd rather be awake out here than in there.

"*Wil*," Phil says, insistent, and suddenly, Phil's hands are on his shoulders, turning him toward him with a light but firm touch. He blinks. "Do you not take care of yourself because you think you don't deserve it?" Something in Phil's voice folds like wet paper, just as fragile, just as flimsy.

He opens his mouth to respond, and no words come.

(there is is, the crux of the matter, the core of it all, because he is a person built of pretty words and self-loathing, and long before he directed any anger at the world around him, he pointed it inward, lashed at himself until only scars remained, and he called that just, called that right)

He's not sure how Phil jumped to that conclusion from all of that. But—he's trying to deny it, trying to refute the point, but the words just won't form.

“Oh, Wilbur,” Phil says, sounding a bit wrecked, and then, the hands on his shoulders move to his arms, gently pulling him forward and into Phil’s embrace. Phil’s arms circle him lightly, his hands rubbing patterns into his back, and then, his wings rise from under his cloak, swooping forward and closing around him in a motion that is all-too familiar from his childhood, in a motion indicating that even now, Phil is trying to comfort him, trying to protect him with all that he is. It’s a hug that means warmth and safety and love, and Wilbur begins to tremble, because—

He doesn’t deserve it. He doesn’t. He doesn’t understand what he did to deserve it.

“You don’t need to do anything to be worthy of love,” Phil murmurs. “You don’t need to do anything to deserve to take care of yourself. And—you’re wrong about your legacy. It’s not just pain and suffering. You’ve done so many good things for so many people, and they remember that, even if you can’t. I see it every day. You were missed, Wil. So fucking missed, by so many more people than just me.”

And that can’t be true. That can’t possibly be true, because he remembers his ending certainty, his declaration that everyone would thank Phil for killing him, that everyone wanted him to do it, and he was so sure of himself, then, because he was the traitor, he was the villain, and villains get what they deserve. And perhaps he wasn’t entirely right, not in Tommy’s case, at any rate, because Tommy wanted him back, at least, but everyone else should have wanted him dead.

But no one has. No one has thus far, at least. No one has tried to do anything to him aside from a few pointed comments. No one has tried to lock him up or kill him. No one has tried, even when they should, they definitely should, because he was hated by the end—wasn’t he?

(no. except for by one, and you have never judged yourself fairly)

So, what does that mean, then? What does it mean that he understands far less than he thought he did? What does it mean that he is struggling for control, falling back into old patterns because it’s all he knows, struggling and falling and failing? He thought he knew, thought he understood well how it all ties together, how to measure his own worth by what he can do, but here is Phil saying that that’s not right at all, and what is he supposed to do with that?

He has vowed to be better. Has been trying to be better. Has he been getting that wrong, too?

Or perhaps he isn’t wrong. Perhaps Phil is. He would like to believe that Phil is. It would be so much easier if Phil is. But here, now, held with arms and wings both, the contact chasing all of the day’s chill away, he’s not sure that he can arrive at that conclusion. Not sure he can let himself deny it, deny this.

But if he is wrong about this, he is wrong about so much, and that—that is terrifying.

“I’ve been trying to be better. I’ve been trying so hard,” he gasps out. “Phil—Phil, I don’t think I know what I’m doing. I don’t think I know *how*.”

“That’s okay,” Phil says. “That’s okay, you don’t have to. You just have to try. That’s all anyone wants. And it’s a process, not a one-and-done thing. It’s okay to not know.” Phil pauses. One hand moves from his back and goes up to card through his hair. Wilbur lets out a sigh. “But part of that is being better toward yourself. You deserve that just by virtue of existing. You don’t have to do anything or make anything. You deserve better things.”

(his own voice: *you deserve good things and you can have them*. but that was to Tommy, for Tommy, and it surely can’t apply to him, surely, because he is different, is not good like Tommy is, because he may be trying not to be the villain anymore but he was one once and he is not good and even before then he was not good enough so surely he cannot turn that around on himself surely he cannot)

“I don’t know if I can believe that,” he admits.

“That’s alright, too,” Phil says. “We can work on it, okay? We’ll all work on it together. Just, remember that you do deserve better things. No matter what your brain is telling you. Your brain is fucking wrong, okay? In this, it’s so fucking wrong. You deserve to be—to be fucking kind to yourself.” He pauses for a moment, and when he continues, his voice is full of trepidation. “Wil, you are—I mean, you do—you do want to—”

He seems to be struggling to phrase it, but Wilbur knows exactly what he’s asking.

“I don’t know about want,” he says. He’s been honest thus far; may as well continue. “I—I didn’t tell you about the time with the Egg, before you got here. It got in my head good. Really good. And it offered me—rest. I tried to give in to it. If other people weren’t there, I would have.”

Phil’s grip on him tightens.

“But I’ve decided I’m staying,” he continues. “I’ve decided. For the sake of—I mean, some of you people seem to care about me, for some godforsaken reason. And I don’t want to hurt you. So I’m staying here. Alive. I’m going to keep trying.”

“Okay,” Phil whispers. “Okay, that’s a good start.”

If that is a start, then what is the end goal? But he’s too worn out to ask. Exhausted in so many more ways than one.

But his mind is quieter. No longer buzzing. Like a storm has finally passed over, leaving destruction in its wake, but also calm.

He finally brings his arms up and embraces Phil in turn, leaning his weight against his chest. The moment he lets himself, all his muscles go limp, his body finally succumbing to the break he so sorely needs.

“You’re a sappy old man, do you know that?” he mumbles.

“I’m your father,” Phil says. “Comes with the territory.”

He hums, pushing his face against Phil's robes. He's clutching at his back, but the cloak has shifted, now that Phil's moved his wings to wrap around him, so if he inches his hands up a bit, they'll hit the wings' base. So he does, slowly, cautiously, and then just lets his hands rest there, against the feathers. Phil stiffens.

"Let me preen them," he says.

Phil takes a second to answer.

"Didn't we just have a conversation about not taking on as much responsibility?" he says, and just as Phil can pick out when he's trying to dodge a topic, he can tell right away that the question is an avoidance.

"This is completely different," he says. "If you don't want me to, I won't. But—" He moves back so he can stare Phil in the face, taking a moment to chew on his next words. "I want to. Please."

He's not sure why this is suddenly so important to him. It's probably something about how the state of these wings is his fault in the first place, about how Phil wrecked them in an effort to protect him, about how he turned around and begged him to kill him a moment later, with no regard for what Phil had just sacrificed. It's probably something about how Phil is talking self-acceptance at him and yet obviously has not been taking care of himself, not in this aspect, at least, and he hates it, hates to see this disregard for things that he once held so dear, hates to see it and know that the blame lies with him. It's probably something about how being held like this takes him back to when he was younger, and he always loved running his hands through his father's feathers when he was still a child, straightening them and cleaning them and taking pride in the fact that he was helping, that he was a part of something, part of a family at last after so long on his own.

It's probably all of that at once.

Something in Phil seems to deflate. His shoulders slump, which is not exactly the reaction Wilbur was hoping for.

And then—

"Alright," Phil whispers. He leans back from the hug, stretching out his wings so that Wilbur can get a good look at them. So he does look, and he struggles to keep his face neutral; he'd hoped, somehow, that his glimpse of them in the Egg's chamber, ragged and bleeding from the thorns, was exaggerated in his memory, that they're not actually in as terrible a way as he remembers. But as Phil allows him to stare, his heart sinks.

Even in the dim light of the stars, he can see that the wings are a mess. And his stomach rolls as his eyes land on bare, scarred patches of skin, on exposed bone. A few places are still bandaged from the damage the Egg did, though potions have done much in the way of healing those particular wounds.

And only those, it seems.

(the Angel of Death will fly no more)

But there are still plenty of feathers, feathers that Phil obviously hasn't been looking after, feathers that fall every which way, sticking out at odd angles. There are a few spots that Phil has evidently straightened himself, but not many. Some appear to be overlapping strangely, poking into the skin in a way that cannot be comfortable.

He looks back to Phil's face. Phil's expression is odd, some combination of resignation and defiance, as if halfway daring him to comment.

So Wilbur doesn't. Just scoots forward slightly and runs his hand across some of the offered feathers.

And then gets to work.

Even in his tired state, the motions are familiar, far too familiar to mess up. Straighten the feathers, pick out dirt and other detritus that's been caught in and beneath them. His hands are more hesitant than they ever have been, struggling with what to do as they near the more obviously injured places, but he does know how to do this. He has done it so many times before.

(and if Phil is allowing him this now, when he obviously has not allowed anyone near his wings in a long time, even Techno, even the son whose side he remained by, then perhaps it is a good sign, and perhaps he can take it as a sign of hope, as a sign that things can be better are getting better no matter the hurts that have yet to heal)

"Do they hurt?" he can't help but ask, voice low.

Phil hesitates a beat too long. "Not usually," he says, and Wilbur knows it for a lie.

There's a lot of feathers loose. A lot of feathers coming out at a mere touch. And Wilbur knows how this works, knows that if the feather is already falling out then it needs to be removed, but it still concerns him, just how many there are, just how many now litter the ground, stirring in the wind.

It's on the tip of his tongue to ask if it hurts right now. But another glance at Phil's face forestalls him. His eyes have drifted shut, the lines around his eyes and on his forehead smoothing out, and the tension has bled from his frame.

(a memory: you have lived in this house scarce weeks and you barely trust these two at all but this boy who will become your brother has sat you down with the man who will become your father and is telling you, determinedly, seriously, resolutely, that if you're going to stick around then you need to know how to do this, and Philza is laughing at the both of you and you are nervous, because you have never had a home before and you want to keep this one, but Technoblade shows you how to card through the feathers, and Phil chirps at you every now and then, soft and encouraging, and it feels a bit like a home, you think, if you'll let yourself have it)

For a moment, he lets his hand hover over bone. It's so very wrong, so very disturbing. Bones should not be extended out of flesh in the way that these are. His stomach flips again.

"This is my fault," he murmurs. The words slip out.

"It was my choice," Phil says, opening his eyes. "I'd do it again." It's a steady declaration this time, no indication of a lie.

(and he almost wishes that there were, because he has never known what to do with unwavering protection, protection that he does not deserve—but then, Phil has told him that his sense of what he deserves might not be right at all, and he doesn't know what to do with that either)

(because the protection offered is without a doubt resolute, unquestioning, unconditional, and in that moment, as the explosions went off and Phil shielded him with no hesitation even though he could not have known that a life lost to them would have been his last because he did not tell him did not tell him anything at all)

(you try not to remember that Phil must have waited for you to respawn and try not to imagine the look on his face when your body remained and somebody had to tell him had to tell him that this is a three-life server and the life he took was the last the last the last the finale the ending an ending he surely did not intend to grant and you cannot let yourself imagine the moment he found out you cannot)

He doesn't have an answer to that. None that Phil would accept, at any rate. So he doesn't answer at all, just keeps dragging his fingers through his father's feathers, neatening them, cleaning them where he can, and there's only so much he's going to be able to do like this, here and now, but it's a start. Judging by the way Phil's eyes are drooping again, he feels more comfortable than before. And really, that was the goal, wasn't it? To do something? Anything?

(anything to ease the weight to lift the burden and Phil has a point, perhaps, about responsibility and taking on too much but this is not a responsibility is not work this is taking care of family and if Phil is allowing you this then perhaps you ought to consider accepting help in return perhaps letting your loved ones in would not be such a bad idea perhaps you can put a little more of yourself on display and trust them to smooth out the rough edges perhaps perhaps)

Eventually, he runs out of feathers to preen, to fix. There is nothing he can do about the scars, the bones, but he has done what he can, and perhaps that means something, even if not everything.

"We should go back inside," Phil murmurs. His words slur slightly; he's listing to the side a bit, obviously just on the edge of sleep. It makes Wilbur glad to know that some things don't change.

"Probably," he says. "I'd like to stay out for a few minutes longer. The stars look nice tonight."

Phil yawns, and halfway through, the noise transforms into a warbling chirp.

“I s’ppose we can do that,” he agrees, and in the next instant, Phil is wrapping his wings around him again, pulling him closer, and he doesn’t fight it. He lets himself lean into Phil’s side, warm and secure. Overhead, the stars spin. And hum. They always hum, even if he can’t quite hear the notes, and for the moment, he feels right with his place in the universe.

He falls asleep like that, finally. His dreams are full of music and feathers and distant birdsong.

He wakes up to the clanging of a bell.

“Oh, *fuck*,” Phil is saying, and the weight of his wings disappears in a split second. Wilbur almost topples over as Phil lurches to his feet, catching himself just in time, bracing himself against the bench and squinting against the morning sun. It *is* morning; that’s probably the best night’s sleep he’s gotten in the past few days, the beginning insomnia notwithstanding. His weariness is not quite gone, but it’s far less prevalent than it has been.

It takes a second for his eyes to adjust to the light. The first thing he sees are the red vines crawling over the sides of the castle, inching toward the roof.

“Shit, fuck,” Phil is still saying, “the enchantments are gone, we need to move—”

The bell clangs twice, then thrice more, and then falls silent. Eret said they had a bell, didn’t they? That they would ring it if something happened, to wake everyone up?

“Fuck,” Phil says, suddenly hushed. “Wil.”

He rises, coming to stand by Phil’s side, peering out toward the gates, the wall, the place where the enchanted boundaries are supposed to be set. The castle itself doesn’t yet seem to be overrun, but the walls are covered in the foliage, and if he watches them carefully, he can see them growing in real time, unfurling toward them like bloody banners.

Dream stands just inside the gates. Behind him, there are others: Bad, Ant, Ponk, Punz, the four they knew to expect for sure, along with a woman he doesn’t recognize, white flowers strewn in her hair and wrapped around her arms. In front of them, Eret stands with their sword held out, and Sapnap staggers to stand beside them, obviously just woken up. Hopefully the others are on the move, too.

But what draws Wilbur’s attention is Ranboo. Standing next to Dream, slouched. Eyes no longer purple, but vacant, staring, dull. Dream has a possessive hand on his shoulder. Ranboo himself isn’t moving.

(betrayed betrayed betrayed even if history does not repeat it rhymes echoes and rhymes and he should’ve known better than to trust should’ve known better than to think that no one

would stab him in the back because that's just what people *do*)

"I hope you took advantage of the time we gave you to prepare," Dream says. "We thought it'd be only fair. But it's checkmate now."

And the smile on his mask seems to grow.

Chapter End Notes

Oop.

Also I often think about how there's no way canonically that c!Phil knew Wilbur was on his last life haha

As always, thank you all so much for reading and for all the comments and kudos!! And [here](#) is the link to my tumblr, as usual!

Next up, Chapter Nineteen: In which everything escalates very quickly, not all is going according to plan, and Wilbur has to make a few decisions.

wake the beast

Chapter Notes

And here we go.

Chapter content warnings for swearing, implied/referenced mind control, referenced past character death, referenced past suicide, mentioned nausea, and blood.

And once again, a cliffhanger warning.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His mind races.

If the enchantments are gone, someone must have destroyed them from within their bounds. Tubbo said as much, said that it was the only way. And now Ranboo stands by Dream's side. Ranboo stands by Dream's side, Dream's hand on him, and he would not have thought it of Ranboo, of the awkward kid who so often sticks close to Techno or to Phil, of the person who they both obviously care for. He would not have thought it—and that was his mistake. He should have been more watchful, more vigilant, should not have dared to let his guard down in the slightest, because *this* is what it gets him, time and time again—

(all eyes on him and his people turn against him in a blink in a second and a sentence and he feels dead even before the arrow tears through his heart)

(and *it was never meant to be*, says a trusted friend and he is numb numb numb even as his comrades his friends his brothers his family die around him and he has been betrayed and he dies terrified and knowing that he has failed and the memory of that first death has never left him nor the pervasive thought that it could happen again that any valued companion could hide a traitor's heart)

"Ranboo wouldn't," Phil says, as if reading his mind. "I don't know what the fuck is going on, but Ranboo wouldn't."

"Just because you think someone *wouldn't* doesn't mean that you're right," he hisses back. "People stab each other in the backs, Phil. It's what they *do*. You ought to know that."

Phil looks at him, eyes wide and wounded, but he pays him little mind, creeping forward to peer further over the side of the roof. He stays low in an effort not to draw attention; the longer Dream doesn't know where they all are, the better.

"How did you get in?" Eret is asking below, their voice steady, commanding. They are still a monarch in their own castle, though the wolves are inside the gate. Beside them, Sapnap takes on a battle-ready stance. There's no sign of anyone else yet, and Wilbur is torn between

hoping that the others will be out any moment and praying that some of them have the good sense to stay inside.

(because he closes his eyes and sees Dream shooting Tommy dead where he stands and he sees the blackstone walls of the final control room and he sees the vine pull Tommy away from him and Dream lunging for him with an axe and it is all too easy to imagine a sword at Tommy's throat at Tubbo's throat at Fundy's throat and he won't let that happen but he couldn't prevent their deaths before but he has to now he has to)

Dream laughs.

"I've said before that I've got eyes everywhere," he says. "It still counts if the eyes don't know you're watching through them. I have to say, that was a good trick, with those enchantments. But people go wandering sometimes. All I had to do was wait until Ranboo stepped back outside." He tugs Ranboo closer to him. Ranboo moves with the pull, completely unresistant, like a rag doll. "Don't worry, I'm taking good care of him. We're great friends."

Wait. That almost sounds like—

He turns to Phil again.

"Can he control other people?" he whispers.

Phil shrugs helplessly. "I've got no fucking clue," he says. "But Ranboo sleepwalks. I dunno, maybe that would make it easier. But Ranboo would never betray us of his own free will."

The cacophony of whispers in his mind, the storm that swirls and tosses and insists that he has been betrayed, that the world is out to get him and that this only confirms as much, quiets. Dies down at Phil's insistence and at the scene before him,

(and you would not have allowed this months ago would not have allowed someone to talk you down did not allow anyone to talk you down so perhaps you do not quite know what better means but that is not to say that you have made no steps toward it toward that nebulous and far away goal even if you have difficulty in recognizing it you are different from how you were you are)

because Phil could be right.

(and it would make sense, perhaps, because even from here he can see the way that Ranboo's eyes stare straight ahead, unseeing, and it is not like how he met him in the corridor last night but it is how he was in the Egg's chamber, and he has wondered for quite some time now how Dream knew to break out of the prison when he did, how he knew to take advantage of their ill-fated attempt, and maybe there has not been a willing betrayal at all)

But if Ranboo is an unwitting accomplice, is somehow under Dream's control, then that only complicates matters further. He's not sure how many complications they can afford before all their planning falls apart at the seams.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “You’re right, we need to move.” He glances back down at Dream. He’s still talking, though it doesn’t sound like anything too important anymore. Nothing they didn’t already know. “He likes to monologue. We can use that.”

Phil nods, and together, they inch back along the roof and toward the stairway. He breaks into a run as soon as he’s sure no one below will see or hear them, and Phil keeps pace with him. They careen through the hallways at breakneck speed, and the further they get back into the main corridors, the more people he can hear, moving about, their footsteps rushed, their voices frantic.

“Wilbur!”

The shout echoes, ping-pongs off the stone walls, loud and overwhelming all else. That is no surprise—Tommy has always known how to make himself heard, even when the moment does not call for it, and he trained himself a long time ago to respond to Tommy’s voice above all others.

(because even when they were younger, even when they were children, brothers by choice taken under Phil’s wings, Tommy always looked to him before anyone else, before Techno, before Phil, and that was even before the other two began leaving so often)

(for better or for worse, your little brother has always believed the sun shines through your eyes and you have him caught in your orbit just as surely as he has caught you in his and perhaps you are twin suns circling one another but then again perhaps not because you crashed and burned and you know better than to believe that it was anyone’s fault but your own and no one’s gravity was powerful enough to help you not when you denied them all)

(though your beliefs once rock solid are shaken and unsteady and the fault lies with you to be sure but you have always assigned yourself more blame than you ought so sure are you that you are at the center at it all that you are on a pedestal the spotlight shining down and some of the fault is yours but not all not all and it is growth to accept responsibility but also growth to let some of it go to let slip from your shoulders that which is not yours to carry)

Tommy all but barrels into him, panting, and he reaches out on instinct to steady him, placing his hands on both his shoulders. Tubbo follows shortly behind, but at a slower pace, his face pale and wan.

“You weren’t in your room,” Tommy gasps out, “you weren’t—where the fuck did you go? And the bell, we heard the bell, and Tubbo said he could feel the enchantments going down, what the fuck is—is he—?”

“Dream is here,” he answers, glancing back and forth between the two of them. “Inside the gates, and he’s not alone. The vines haven’t reached the castle proper yet, but they’re making an effort.”

Tommy draws in a sharp breath, and Wilbur hates this. Hates that this is happening, that any of them are being put in these positions at all. Hates that Tommy is confronted with this danger time and time again, that Tommy never seems to get a rest, never seems to have time

to heal, that he and Tubbo both have never had the opportunity to escape the soldier's uniforms that he dressed them in, he in all his misguided hopes and dreams.

But he's thought as much before. It never stops the hated thing from occurring.

"So is that it, then?" Tubbo asks quietly. "It's all coming down to this?" His voice is bleak, and Wilbur wishes he could understand all the weight behind his words

(a weight that comes from being a soldier a spy a president an executioner a leader of so much rubble, that comes from exiling his best friend for the good of his nation, that comes from being trapped in a box with nowhere to run, that comes from no walls being strong enough and no weapons powerful enough to protect himself, that comes from seeing it all come crashing down again and again and being helpless to stop any of it, and it is easy to allow Tubbo to slip to the sidelines when Tommy is so much louder, so much more overt with his fears and his pains, but Tubbo has been hurt just as surely, and he needs to remember that, when all of this is over, needs to remember that Tubbo needs healing and safety just as Tommy does, and he needs to remember and so he will)

but now is not the time to over-analyze, to pick through tone and cadence until the true meaning is laid bare.

"What about our plan?" Tommy says. "What about—do we still try? Or do we just have to go down there and—"

He's trying not to act panicked, is trying to disguise his quick breaths, his shaking hands. Is trying, and failing, and Wilbur continues to grip him by the shoulders, even if it doesn't seem to do anything at all.

"We were too slow with it," he says, blunt. "We're being pushed into reacting rather than instigating ourselves. But we have to work with it. We don't fall here. We fight—"

"We go through with it." The voice is confident, steady, brooking no room for argument. He looks past Tommy's shoulders to see Techno striding down the hallway, hair loose, armor already on, shining netherite sword in hand. He doesn't know if this is his typical gear or spares—he doesn't remember whether anyone thought to pick up his scattered inventory or not, when he died. But it doesn't seem to matter.

"Do we?" Tubbo asks. "Seems like it's gone a bit pear-shaped, Technoblade."

"Yeah," Techno says, "but we were plannin' to lure some of them away from the Egg anyway. They've practically done our job for us. Sure, we're on the defensive, which isn't—I won't lie, that isn't fantastic. But we can still work with this, as long as we're quick." He draws up short next to everybody and levels a stare right at him. "Phil and I will go out there and help hold them off. Wilbur, can you do this?"

He knows what he's asking.

"Hold on," Phil says, "I don't know if that's a good idea. Maybe we get someone else to—"

Techno shakes his head, visibly frustrated. He doesn't have the context that Phil now does, doesn't know what the Egg whispers to him, doesn't know that he nearly gave in, doesn't know that he *did*.

Wilbur sort of regrets telling Phil any of that, now, in retrospect.

"Who?" Techno says. "Who else, Phil? The options are they go try and make that omelet, or they stay here and hope that we can hold off Dream and his goons. If the castle is breached, I'd feel a whole lot better knowin' they're not in here."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Tommy jumps in. "What do you mean, *they*? I'm not hiding in this fucking castle, Technoblade, what the fuck are you on?"

"You're not fightin' Dream," Techno shoots back. "Don't try to argue with me. You're not. You're not gettin' anywhere near him. So your choices are, you go with Wilbur, or you stay right here, inside."

Tommy gapes, mouth working. There is some kind of realization dawning behind his eyes, (and there is only one realization to come to, really, and that is that Techno does care about him, that Techno is trying to protect him in his own clumsy way, and it doesn't make up for everything or for anything, really, but they've already made a start already laid the foundations for forgiveness, and he can only hope that Tommy sees it that way)

but there's no time. Even though this feels like it's all happening far too quickly, there is no time. There is no time for any of this.

"I can do it," he says, and prays he's not lying. "I'll take Tommy and Tubbo with me. They'll be safe, Technoblade."

He meets his brother's eyes, and sees there

(determination and anger and hope and a thousand cuts crusted over and not stitched closed and perhaps a lingering flicker of gold from a death that is sure to have scarred him even though he hasn't spoken on it and will likely refuse to do so but there is trust there against all the odds there is trust in Technoblade's eyes trust in the eyes of the brother who he has called his twin who he has used and strung along and not apologized to nearly enough but despite it all there is trust)

an emotion too deep to interpret.

"Why are you talking like that?" Tommy demands. He shrugs off Wilbur's hold. "Why are you talking like you might—"

Die is almost certainly the word he intends to finish that sentence with, but he cuts himself off.

"I know they will," Techno says. To his side, Phil sighs, closing his eyes, and then, Techno looks to Tommy. "Technoblade never dies, Tommy. Don't worry so much. Dream'll get what's comin' to him."

Tommy flinches. “I’m not worried, dickhead. Who’d worry about you?” His voice cracks.

(Dream’s axe buries itself in Technoblade’s throat, and the red blends with the rest of the room)

“If we’re going, we need to. Like, now,” Tubbo says. Ever practical. Ever responsible.

“We do,” he agrees.

(it’s not a farewell it’s a see you later but he hates that phrase because you never know when it is a farewell, no one ever does, and a see you later never gives the closure that people so sorely need)

(and he never said goodbye in any way that counted)

They’ll be heading for opposite stairwells then, from here. Phil and Techno will go for the front, he and Tubbo and Tommy for the back. This is a separation, even though so much of his mind is screaming not to let them out of his sight, to not allow them to split up, not when there’s every possibility that this will end poorly, will not go in their favor.

(this will not be the end the story will not end here and they will see each other again there is war and there is the other side and there is a new sunrise and they will live to see it)

“Wilbur,” Techno says, and then, he’s pressing something into his hand. He looks down, and it’s a totem. Golden and whole, eyes of emerald. He looks back up.

“I have another one,” Techno says. “For me or Phil. This one’s for you. Or Tommy, or Tubbo. Call it insurance. But dying at all would be pretty cringe. Y’know?”

“I know,” he says, and closes his fingers around the figurine. “So don’t you dare. Either of you.” He flicks his gaze to Phil. Phil nods at him, and the same message is reflected in his eyes.

“That’s the plan,” Phil says quietly. He’s been quiet, this whole time. Tommy makes a soft, choked noise, making an aborted movement as if to step forward. But then, Techno and Phil are turning, striding down the corridor, to where the sounds of battle outside are growing louder by the second, and they’ve lingered here for far too long. Somehow, he doesn’t regret it.

(it’s not a goodbye but just in case it is, just in case, just in case, he has braced himself for the worst)

“They’re going to be alright,” Tommy says, voice pitching higher. “They’re going to be alright, aren’t they?”

“Technoblade never dies,” Tubbo repeats quietly. “And Phil doesn’t either.”

“They’ll be fine,” Wilbur says, and tries to believe himself, tries not to think of Dream lying in wait for them, Dream who has already managed to kill Techno once, Dream who is making what he surely believes will be his final move, the checkmate of his game,

(but this is no game)

Dream who may no longer be a god but is surely something other than human, something stronger, something else. And it has been a long time since he was able to truly believe his family invincible. The events of the past few days have only compounded that.

But there is no time for these considerations. They are all in it now. In his heart of hearts, he knows that this, come what may, will be the end of the ordeal. Someone will come out victorious this morning. And if it is to be them, they have no time to delay. So he jerks his head in the direction of the back stairwell, and his walk becomes a sprint, Tommy and Tubbo following behind him, their footsteps pounding against the floor. He takes the last few stairs at a jump.

(a realization, sudden as he impacts: he forgot to tell Techno their suspicions about Ranboo, but it is too late to turn back and catch up, and surely Phil will, surely, and it's probably for the best that he did not say it aloud in the presence of the other two, because Tubbo and Tommy both seem to be friends with the boy to some extent, at least, and it would be unwise to cause them more anxiety, unwise to present them with yet another problem that they can do nothing about, especially when they may already be running full-tilt into their deaths as much as he will attempt to prevent as much)

As far as he remembers, the swords were left in the throne room, on the table where they were dropped, where a god bent reality to place them. So that's where they need to go. Get at least one sword, and then, it's off to the Egg, and he can only hope that he will have the strength to do what needs to be done. It was not meant to be him in this role. Was meant to be someone else, someone more resistant to the Egg's call, because even he can admit when someone else would truly be a better fit for the task. Someone like Techno, who discards the voice as just one among many, or someone like Puffy, perhaps, who, as it turns out, has fallen under its sway once and uses that to form her resolution to never allow it in again. But they left it too long, and their base is under attack, the assault happening on their enemy's terms and not theirs, and Dream must be held at bay here. The best fighters are needed.

So he'll take up the sword himself, drive it into the Egg's shell before it has the opportunity to tempt him. Hopefully the rest will fall into place.

(though when, *when* is it ever that simple?)

And then—

“Tubbo!” someone calls from down the hall. “Tommy!” And then, a beat of hesitation, and a slightly softer, more hesitant, “Wil!” And Fundy is running toward them, from the direction they're heading toward, armor half on and half off, and he supposes he should be glad that he received any acknowledgment at all. “I was looking for you guys. I don't know what's going on! What's going on? Are we under attack? Is that what's happening?”

He's frantic, panicky, his words falling out rapid-fire, and—Wilbur can't leave him here. Separating from Techno and Phil was bad enough, and he knows that they're capable warriors, have decimated armies between them, that their monikers are no empty threats. Fundy—Fundy can take care of himself. He has proved that much, even if the thought makes

his heart wrench painfully, even if he blinks and still sees his darling boy interposed over the man he has become, even if his mind struggles to accept that his child has grown up without him,

(perhaps in spite of him but that hurts worse so he refuses to let the idea linger)

even if the feeling of failure is absolute, all-encompassing, chains wrapped around his chest and squeezing. Even despite all that, he knows that Fundy is strong. Is grown. Is far from the days where he needed a father's protection. But he cannot leave him here, in a castle that might fall to the enemy. Cannot leave him where Dream might get his hands on him. Cannot abandon him again, even if it's what's expected, even if it might be what Fundy wants. He cannot, and perhaps bringing him to the Egg is a worse idea, but Fundy can defend himself from dreamons, knows all the same tricks as Tubbo. He could be of help, perhaps.

(though that is an excuse because the desire to bring him along to keep him in his sight is far from rational is born of fear and protectiveness because even if Fundy hates him even if Fundy wants nothing to do with him he wants to see him safe and some part of him still believes even after everything even after disowning each other even after the betrayal he felt in the ravine as Fundy licked the boots of a tyrant and even after the betrayal Fundy must have felt in turn after he refused to believe him and tossed his efforts aside even after all of that he still believes himself the most capable person to keep his son safe and he must see with his own eyes that he is well)

"Dream's attacking," he says, and does not slow to a stop, even as Fundy comes up to them. Instead, he grabs Fundy's wrist, ignoring his startled noise, and changes his momentum, taking him along with them. "We're enacting the plan as best we can. We're going to the Egg. Will you help us?"

Fundy doesn't reply for a moment, and the only sounds are their feet against the stones. They're deep enough in the castle that the battle out front no longer reaches their ears.

"You want me?" Fundy asks. "Really?"

(the doubt in his voice is an arrow to the back is water rising around his ears is sinking and falling and hitting the ground too hard)

"Of course," he says, and even though now is not for a conversation like this, he opens his mouth again, and starts, even as they keep running, "Fundy, I—"

But then, he stops abruptly, because suddenly Eret steps out in front of them, their shoulder bleeding heavily but their posture still erect, still lordly, still every inch a king. And Wilbur should despise them, but now is not for that, either, so the anger washes away, and he skids to a stop in front of them and feels only confusion for the fact that they are here and not outside, where he last saw them.

Eret steps forward, and proffers to him a sword, gleaming, electrified with an otherworldly aura, the presence of the universe contained in glowing runes and the sharpened point, and—ah. So Eret had the same idea.

“Good luck, all of you,” they say. Wilbur takes the sword, and for a moment, his fingers brush against theirs. He does not recoil from the contact.

“How is it looking?” he asks.

“Not amazing, but not terrible,” Eret answers. “I came to find you and to down a potion. It seems to be only the six of them at the moment, seven counting Ranboo, which I’m not sure whether we should or not—”

“What do you mean, counting Ranboo?” Tubbo demands. He shakes his head, trying to convey *now is not the time* without so many words, and Tubbo subsides, though reluctantly.

But Tubbo’s always been good at compartmentalization.

“—and they don’t seem to be trying to surround us,” Eret is continuing. “Not yet, at any rate, so if you go out ‘round the back, you should escape detection. Though I find it unlikely that they left the Egg completely unguarded. This has trap written all over it.”

He nods. It has occurred to him, of course, and Eret’s words only solidify his belief. If Dream wanted to take them all out here, now, he’d be smarter about it. He wouldn’t announce his presence, wouldn’t focus his attack in one spot. This maneuver is just asking for someone to escape, to head for the Egg, and he can only hope that they’re several more steps ahead of Dream than he believes them to be. If they are not, then Dream will be proven correct, and it truly will be checkmate.

Really, it all comes down to whether he knows they have these swords or not. Whether he knows that dreamons are not invincible. Whether he knows the universe has intervened.

(humming a tune)

“So, it’s a regular day, then,” he says. “I assume you’re taking the other?” He indicates the sword, and Eret’s lips twist wryly.

“That was the original plan, wasn’t it?” they say. “One for the Egg and one for Dream.” Their posture shifts a bit, almost imperceptibly, but suddenly they remind him far more of a soldier than a monarch. The soldier that they were, once, under his command. “We’ll handle things here, Wilbur. You all take it to the Egg. We’re finishing this today.”

He regards them. There is no sign of duplicity in their bearing. But then, there never was before, and perhaps it is not a good idea to allow them to take the second sword after all, because how sure can he truly be that—

No. No, he will not spiral down that road. Not now, not today. He is making a choice. And trust is not entirely built on choice, not really, because trust is a fragile thing, formed gradually, of shared experiences and opening up far more than he is comfortable with, but in an instant? In a singular moment? He can choose to trust. Can choose to have faith. And he doesn’t know whether Eret has earned it or not. But he doesn’t know that he has, either, and he will not be the one to deny them the opportunity to grow. To be better. He will not.

(and just maybe it truly is time for the old song to receive another revision)

“Yes,” he says. “We are.” And he meets Eret’s eyes, as best he can behind the glasses they perpetually wear. “Good luck, Eret.”

Eret smiles at him, small but genuine. And then they, too, turn on their heel and run off, back to the front, back to the chaos. He has stared at a lot of retreating backs today. He hopes that’s not an omen.

But then, he’s not one to believe in omens.

“Wait, we’re just going to let them go?” Fundy asks. “On their own?”

“They won’t be on their own,” he replies. “And neither are we.” He looks to the other three, to his son, visibly shaking, to Tubbo, face set in a hard expression, to Tommy, who is desperately trying to mask his fear. “You heard them. We go out the back and circle back around to the Egg’s chamber. Tubbo, Fundy, is there anything you can do to hide us on the way there?”

“We can try our best,” Tubbo says. “Right, Fundy?”

“Oh! Um, right, right, yeah, we can do that,” Fundy says.

“Then equip everything you need, and let’s go,” he says, the general’s orders coming easy in this moment. He still holds the sword in his hand; it weighs on him more heavily than it should, but he doesn’t know whether it’s the material it’s made out of or his mind playing tricks on him, something to do with a metaphor about the burden of responsibility. Heavy lies the head that wears the crown; heavy falls the hand that bears the sword.

He only hopes that the blow he strikes will land heavily enough.

It is easy to leave the castle. Too easy, perhaps, and all of his nerves are a clamoring mess, insisting that this is wrong, wrong, wrong. In this, at least, he is inclined to listen to his instincts; nothing in war ever comes this easily, and Dream is too smart to leave them such a simple way out unless he wanted them to take it. Wanted someone to take it, at least. Perhaps not them specifically,

(but you have never been one to believe in coincidence)

but the danger of falling into a trap is very real and present. Because it is, undoubtedly, a trap. Of what kind, he doesn’t yet know.

They slip out the back entrance. Fundy and Tubbo have a muttered discussion

(and Fundy keeps shooting looks at him, looks that he has to force himself to ignore, because he doesn't know what they mean doesn't know what Fundy wants from him and if Fundy would tell him what he wants then he would burn the world to give it to him even if what Fundy wants is for him to leave him alone he will do it no matter the part of him that such a deed would crush because it is no one's fault but his and it is about time he began to respect his son's wishes)

and then begin chanting under their breaths, words in a language that he does not recognize, but soon after they start, the static recedes from his mind, the Egg held at a further distance—and it is probably concerning that he didn't notice that it was there again in the first place. Tommy sticks close by his side, staring at the other two with an unsettled expression and every so often brushing his fingers against the sleeve of his coat, as if reassuring himself. At any other time, Wilbur would tease him for it. As it is, he rather likes the reassurance himself.

The vines are crowded, clustered, making their progress slow. They writhe on the ground like snakes, or like worms, wriggling and oozing, and though they don't actually seem to be secreting any sort of substance, sometimes he blinks and sees them covered in blood. But at least, they don't seem to be interested in them, all of them stretching and straining and growing toward the castle, even before Tubbo and Fundy begin their incantation. And after that, some of the vines part before them, rearing away from their approach.

Picking their way through them is still difficult. And whenever he looks at them for too long, nausea rises in his throat.

But they manage to arrive at the entrance to the spider spawner completely unimpeded, and he stares down into the familiar hole. He's been here thrice now. Both visits before, it all went terribly, horribly wrong. The first time, he was dragged out screaming. The second time, he stumbled into the sunlight having just watched his brother die.

"Third time's the charm?" Tubbo suggests.

"Shut the fuck up," Tommy returns, though there is little heart in it.

"Are we actually going down there?" Fundy asks.

"You don't have to," he says. "None of you three have to. You could all stay up here. It might be safer. I don't know."

He doesn't want to force them to confront the Egg again. Doesn't want to bring them back to that room. Or in Fundy's case, doesn't want to expose him at all. Doesn't want him to have to confront the evil that lies down there. But he can't guarantee that it would be any safer for them to remain above ground. Can't guarantee that no enemy would come along.

He can't guarantee anything. He doesn't like the feeling.

"Like hell," Tommy says. "You are not going down there by yourself. What kind of idiots do you think we are?"

“Yeah, big man, you’re not going in without us,” Tubbo says. “Not after—literally everything that’s ever happened down there.”

“What did happen down there?” Fundy asks. “I mean, I know Techno died. You guys told me that. But like, what else? I guess it was bad?”

He closes his eyes.

He’s already told his father. Tommy and Tubbo have been there for all the worst of it. But does he really want to tell his son?

(he can look at you no worse than he already does though you’re not sure that’s true and you do not want to see his reaction to knowing just how much of a wreck you still are the wreck that the Egg appeals to and you do not want to see horror on his face and you do not want to see pity and you do not know which would be worse but you would take cold anger over either of those)

“It got the best of us, and of me, specifically. Multiple times,” he says. That will do. Not a lie, but not too specific. But Fundy’s ears twitch, his eyes narrowing, and he knows that he’s about to ask for more details. “Now’s not the time to get into it further. We need to move.”

“It’s never the time,” Fundy mutters, and it takes all of his self-control to prevent himself from flinching, because that—is not about this, surely. But Fundy subsides, and Tubbo has stepped up to the edge of the entrance, staring down in concentration, and Tommy has a sword in his hand. Not the sword, but a sword, netherite and clearly well-used.

He has *the* sword. And a bow. No armor, though the rest of them are all kitted out. Full netherite. They’re as safe as they can be

(though that didn’t save Technoblade)

and they have no more time to waste.

So down they go.

The room containing the spider spawner, enchantment table and anvil and all, is choked so completely with vines that it is difficult to see past them. But there is a clear path, leading right to the Egg’s chamber, possible for people to traverse, and it has so obviously been left open as a walkway that even his instincts fall quiet, because it doesn’t get more clear than that. No sense in his mind shouting *trap!* at him over and over again when the bait is plain as day.

“This sucks,” Fundy says. But he makes no move to retreat.

(he thinks he might want him to, actually, thinks he might want all of them to go back, to climb back out and into the morning sun, despite the danger that no doubt still exists above, because there is danger and then there is danger, and though he wants to keep them all safe keep them all close to him he does not know that this is a danger that he can protect them from and perhaps he should have admitted as much earlier and perhaps this was all a mistake

the greatest mistake he has made since his return and perhaps they need to run they all need to run and perhaps he cannot do this at all perhaps it is only hubris that has led him here and perhaps Icarus would have learned his lesson had he been granted a second chance but it seems it seems that he has not that he is facing the red sun knowing full well that it will melt his wings and he is only pretending that there will be any other outcome and)

Tommy snorts. “You can say that again,” he says, but he just sort of sounds tired.

“Nowhere to go but forward,” Tubbo murmurs. “You taking point, Wilbur?”

He can delay no longer.

He nods, and strides forward, wincing every time he treads on a vine, which is about every other step. The air grows warmer, more humid, more stifling. Each breath requires more effort. The air becomes a red haze, shimmering and distorted like heat coming off metal or pavement on a sweltering day.

The Egg’s chamber is more cluttered than he remembers it. The red vines sway gently, and make no move to attack them, to strangle them as they

(Technoblade dangling a snap of his neck and then a moment later the brilliant gold the phoenix rising the god deathless until he was not)

step inside. The Egg itself is unchanged, sitting in its corner. Blood red. Almost innocuous.

Static presses in around him, just barely kept at bay by the enchantments that Tubbo and Fundy laid. And even those will give out within minutes. He’s not sure how he knows,

(you do not bring a sword to a duel of bow and arrow and you do not hope to lay down magic against a dark void thing in the thing’s own lair)

but he is sure of it.

And the Egg is not alone.

“Fuck,” Tubbo murmurs. He echoes the sentiment, but all his words are caught up in his throat and tangled in his chest, a web beyond saving, beyond saving him or anyone else, thread that is too coarse and too rough and too fragile to have any hope of mending this.

To one side, there is a boy, one that he vaguely recognizes as Purpled. He seems bored, watching them with sharpness, but also some degree of indifference. But Wilbur cannot focus on him, even though from what he knows, the kid is a dangerous mercenary.

Flanking the Egg itself, there is Jack Manifold. And there is Niki.

Jack Manifold seems unchanged, though the lenses of his glasses are both red, now, where he was sure that one was blue before, and his expression is set into something harsher than he ever recalls him being. But then, he never paid too much attention to Jack Manifold. Niki, though, Niki—the bags underneath her eyes are prominent, dark and deep, and he almost takes them for thick eyeliner at first. Her face is more lined than he remembers it, her hair a

different color. And her eyes are red. Red like fire, red like blood, red like the shards of a shattered mirror, red like a thousand broken things.

Around her shoulders, she wears the hood of his coat. Slowly, his hand comes up to feel around his shoulder blades, and finds the hood missing. He's not sure how he never noticed that before.

(he gave her one of his coats, didn't he?)

They both grip swords. Purpled has one too.

(there is a creature living in his chest, wounded and desperate and howling, but for once it does not slam against his ribcage, seeking its freedom, but curls up in a corner, whining, pitiful)

"The Egg said you would be coming," Niki says, and somehow, her voice is both flat and trembling with restrained emotion. "It said—you were back."

His tongue lies like lead.

"Niki?" Fundy asks, and steps forward. He shoots out a hand to hold him back, to keep him from going too far, and Fundy glares but does not fight it. "You're really with the Egg?" And at the same time, Tubbo starts on something: "C'mon, Jack, why'd you think joining up with the breakfast item would be a good idea?"

Tommy, conspicuously, remains silent.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Jack Manifold snaps. "Tell me, Tubbo, what other options did I have? Did you even think to come and tell me about literally anything that's been going on? No? I don't think so."

"We've been overlooked," Niki says, and her voice is quieter, but there is no softness in it. Only anger, and he does not know whether the emotion is the Egg's or hers. Or both. But he would deserve it, if it was hers. He knows that. "Forgotten, cast aside time and time again. Abandoned by the people who were supposed to care about us."

(the creature whines again at the word at abandoned at abandoned because he didn't mean to he wasn't thinking about abandoning anyone he just knew that they would be better off without him without him and his corrupted creation without him to drag them all down because he was the villain he was)

"But the Egg's going to give us what we want," she continues. "Joining it was the best choice for us. The best choice for me." And she speaks it so defiantly, as if daring him to argue, and there's a trap in that, a trap in trying to tell her that it's not a good thing, that she should have chosen something different. Because he has no right to dictate Niki's choices. Nobody does.

But that includes the demonic egg.

"What's it going to give you, Niki?" he asks, finding his words at last. Jack scoffs, and Niki's eyes flash.

“What’s it going to give me?” she parrots. “How can you think that you of all people have the right to ask me that? I mourned you, Wil. I mourned you for so long. It was hard to eat, hard to sleep. For the longest time I couldn’t even accept that you were gone, that that—that *ghost* took your place and forgot all about me. But that’s—I don’t need you. I don’t need your promises, and I don’t need your lies. I’ve got the Egg on my side.”

(that’s wrong wrong wrong because he never forgot about Niki not even once even when he willfully let the rest of his memories slip through his fingers like the blue that stained his skin even then he never forgot the scent of freshly baked bread never forgot her smile her steadfastness and never forgot missing her either missing her when it was too dangerous to come for her when one wrong move would mean getting her killed never forgot stepping up and offering his final life for hers because she was always worth so much more than he ever could be and even when he forgot everything else he never forgot a thing about her)

(and the irony of her statements is not lost on him, because perhaps he is a liar perhaps he is built of empty promises promises that scattered like ash in the wind over the cliff top but if he is that then what is the Egg)

“*We*’ve got the Egg on our side,” Jack says. “You want to know what we want? It’s simple. We want Tommy dead.”

The words land like a rockslide. Or too much TNT.

His fingers twitch, a second away from calling a weapon to his hand.

Tommy is still silent.

“You *what*?” Tubbo says. “Jack?”

He sounds like he’s hoping it’s a joke. But Jack just crosses his arms.

“We’re tired of him doing whatever he wants and not facing any consequences,” Jack declares. “He keeps on getting away with everything. He *literally* killed me and didn’t even apologize for it! And he was one of my best friends! I went to *hell* and had to claw my way back out, and that’s his fault.”

“Everywhere he goes, there’s conflict and suffering,” Niki says, and her voice is filled with less hatred than Jack’s, but that’s not saying much. “Until he’s gone, there will be no peace on this server.”

“We’ve tried before. We even tried to nuke him, and somehow we managed to fuck that up,” Jack says. “It never seems to work. But with the Egg’s help, it will. We’ve made sure of it.”

“You tried to—oh my god,” Tubbo says. “Oh my god, did you—did you actually—I *trusted* you!”

“And I trusted you,” Jack says. “You’re a good sort, Tubbo, really. I do like you. ‘S why I never wanted you to find out like this. But in the end, you still let me down. I don’t hold it against you, because everyone does it. The only one who ever looks out for me is me. Niki

and I have that in common, see? But Tommy needs to go. And I'm sorry if that's going to hurt you, but I'm not sorry for doing it." He pauses. "And if you join the Egg anyway, it can make sure it doesn't hurt, actually, so you should really consider it."

Tubbo's face is a mask of horror, tears glimmering in his eyes. There's something here that he's missing. But now hardly seems like the time to ask.

"He never takes any responsibility," Niki says. "He needs to. For once."

Beside him, he hears Tommy draw in a shaky breath, and—he's not actually believing any of this, is he? But he's not denying it, as he might expect, and looking to his face, to an expression that reads like sorrow and resignation but no shock at all, he realizes that Tommy knew, to some degree. Knew that Niki and Jack have been—have been trying to *kill* him, and he's just *accepted* that, and that breaks Wilbur from his stupor, draws him from the sea of guilt that he's been swimming in ever since he laid eyes on Niki's face. Because he has wronged her. Has hurt her. And he needs to make it right, as best he can. But that doesn't mean she gets to take it all out on his little brother.

"Never takes any responsibility?" he repeats sharply. "Never—do you know Tommy at all, Niki? Or did you forget the time he was exiled and abused for the high crime of—oh, let me see, grieving someone's house? Or the time he was chased out of our nation for the fact that he was my running mate? Or the time—I mean, are you even hearing yourself? You think Tommy doesn't take responsibility? You think Tommy's never suffered? He's a teenager, Niki! And he's been through worse than any teenager ever should be. You can't blame him for things that were never his fault in the first place."

Tommy stiffens. And for a moment, she seems to waver, glancing at him, and then at Jack, frowning. For a moment, he thinks he might have broken through. But then, she hardens.

"I'm sick of everyone making excuses for him," she says. "I won't take it any more. And you—you have *no* right." Her voice breaks. "I think we're done talking." Her fingers flex around the hilt of her sword, and that is all the warning he receives before she charges forward, weapon held high, Jack at her side, and he goes for his bow, goes to take a shot,

(though it might fly wide because he doesn't know that he can bring himself to injure her even for Tommy's sake and he thinks he will if he has to but whether the fortitude it will take is beyond him is difficult to say)

but then a weight hits him from the side, sending him flying, and he pulls his head back up, expecting to see the vines twisting, dancing, slamming into him, but instead, it is Purpled, now standing over him as he's sprawled on the ground, sword in his hand. And he's between him and Tommy, him and Tubbo, him and Fundy, and now Tubbo is yelling and there is the clash of metal on metal as Niki and Jack attack, as Niki and Jack go in for the kill that the Egg has promised them, and he is on the ground and Purpled blocks his path, blocks his way, blocks him from helping them.

"Sorry, Wilbur," Purpled says. Cool, casual, perhaps vaguely apologetic. "Business is business."

And then, just as he's pushing himself to his feet, unsteady and desperate, the enchantments give out. The protection that Tubbo and Fundy attempted to give them, gone.

So, here you are, the Egg says, and here I am, as I ever am and always will be. Hello, void child, will you let me bring you home?

Chapter End Notes

If you'll believe me, the original ending for this chapter was going to be an even worse cliffhanger! It just got to be 8k words and I was like... alright, we're gonna divide this up a little bit more. Should be about four or so chapters left, I think.

Thank you all for your continued response to this story, y'all are so amazing I can't even. Here is my [tumblr](#) if you'd like to come hang!

Next up, Chapter Twenty: In which Wilbur makes a desperate choice, and it all comes down to this.

dark into the heat

Chapter Notes

I wish I could say this chapter didn't also end on a cliffhanger, but I would be lying.

Content warnings this chapter for swearing, blood, manipulation, suicidal ideation, mind control, violence, injury, and threatened death. Also, as a more Egg-specific warning, the Egg says a lot of things that read very much like victim blaming, because the Egg's a prick, so be mindful of that as well.

If you want something to distract you, you can also play a game of spot the song references this chapter! There's several. Not sure if it'll ease the pain at all, but there might as well be a little fun involved, right? Right?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

No. No, no, no, he needs to ignore it. He knows better than to listen, knows better than—

He can feel it. He can feel it poking around in his mind. He can *feel* it again. And it knows he can feel it. It knows, and it's smug about it. It's smug because it knows he hates the sensation, feels violated by it, and it likes that, likes the power it has over him. His stomach lurches, and he staggers. Purpled watches him, advancing slowly.

But no. No, he can't give in, can't let it distract him. He *can't*.

"What's it offering you?" he gasps out. He tries to stand straighter, but the world around him wavers and ripples, and not just in the heat. He can feel it, feel it still, though it has not yet spoken again. It is going to. It is going to, going to speak to him with honeyed words and dripping promises, going to coax and persuade and worm its way inside, and knowing that it's coming doesn't make it any easier to bear.

Only time will tell whether it makes it easier to resist.

Purpled shrugs, still approaching. Once he attacks again, he's done for. He can't fight off Purpled on a good day, much less now.

"Money," Purpled says. "I mean, what else? It's a job."

And the way he says it is as if—

"It's not controlling you," he says, and wonders how he didn't realize it before. Purpled looks completely unchanged. No part of him has faded to white or deepened to red, and his voice holds none of the fanatic edge that the Egg's followers possess. "It's just paying you."

“I don’t like the thought of being mind controlled,” Purpled agrees. “But I do like being paid. So, like I said, sorry. But I’ve taken the job.”

“I’ll double whatever they’re paying you to switch sides,” he says. “Or not even switch sides, if you don’t want. Just stay out of it. Don’t attack me and mine. Leave.”

Purpled tilts his head. He’s listening. Good. His grip on his sword does not relax, but he pauses in his approach.

“How do I know you’re good for it?” he asks.

“I’m good for it because my brother is Technoblade,” he says. “You know, the Blood God? Nigh on impossible to defeat in combat, one of the richest people on the server? He honors the agreements he makes, and I, as his brother, can make one for him. You’ll get your money.”

“So the money’s not even yours,” Purpled says. “But—Technoblade, you say? And you just want me to stay out of it?” He pauses. “Triple it and you’ve got a deal.”

“Done.”

And just like that, Purpled nods. There may be some measure of relief in his face; Wilbur isn’t sure. But perhaps Purpled was never all that comfortable taking orders from the thing, money or no. But Purpled nods, and Purpled moves toward the exit, and Jack, at least, notices, and shouts, “Traitor!” Some of the vines spring to life, attempting to stop him from leaving. But Purpled slices through them easily enough, with a practiced and steady hand, and then he’s vanishing up the corridor.

He didn’t expect it to be that easy.

(but at the end of the day, mercenary or not, isn’t Purpled still a child, too? a teenager caught up in forces beyond his control, just trying to make it through to another day? perhaps he was looking for an out all along, and if that is the case, he is more than happy to give him one, and not just for his own sake)

You have always been clever, the Egg says, always been quick with your words and quick to spin a deal in your favor, quick to have them all dancing to your tune, so very quick to use whatever power you have, so very quick, but you know better than to thank yourself for it, know better than to believe that it lends you superiority, and you know better than to believe that this is a victory at all, know better than to believe you have accomplished anything. What is your plan, Wilbur Soot? What blow do you seek to strike against me?

He shakes his head. It’s digging deeper, like a swarm of stinging hornets crawling in his skull. He takes a few clumsy steps forward, begging his blurry vision to resolve. It doesn’t, not quite, but he can see well enough to know what’s happening, to see that Jack and Niki are concentrated on their attack, that Tubbo is vicious in his counters and Tommy is halfhearted, and Fundy—where is Fundy—?

There, a few feet away, crouched on the ground, hands on his ears. The whites of his eyes are visible, and he rocks back and forth slightly. “Shut up,” he says, barely audible, “shut up, no, no, I’m not listening to you, leave me alone—”

He sees red for a different reason.

“Stop it,” he rasps. “Stop it. Leave him be, leave them all be.”

They are with me because I give them everything they want, everything they dream, and if your little wonder, your little champion joins my ranks then it is because you have failed him, because you cannot give him the love he deserves, and that is no one’s fault but yours, ash child, the Egg says, and he nearly doubles over with the force of it, with the *truth* of it.

(no, no, not truth, not truth, because here before you is a true monster the true villain the true enemy and it lies and manipulates as part of its nature and you can feel its claws in you and you should not think that just because it agrees with your own warped perception of yourself that it is right because you are just beginning to learn that perhaps you are not right yourself not right about yourself and remember what Phil told you, about healing and deserving)

But then, the Egg keeps on, isn’t that better to think about, isn’t that nicer than to imagine his blood spilling across my roots, for I am hungry and I will be fed, and if not with your boy’s blood then with that of someone else but is it not better to imagine him becoming one with me and mine, for is it not better to offer him up to me than to lose him?

(no)

“I’d lose him either way,” he says. “Don’t fuck with me, I’d lose—I’d be losing him just as surely.”

And perhaps he’s already lost him. Perhaps his son no longer wants a father at all. But even if that is the case, he will be damned before he allows the Egg to take him. So he lurches forward again. Draws his bow from his inventory. Fires off a shot. He’s not even thinking about it, really, but he fires off a shot, and he aims it for Jack Manifold

(and he can’t remember the last time he saw Jack Manifold, but he vaguely thinks that he may have taken one of his lives as well, maybe, in the heat and the rush of things, and he can’t remember whether it was a mistake or on purpose but neither matters right now)

and it flies wide. He doesn’t see where it lands. He nocks another arrow to the string. His hands shake. Niki drives Tubbo back with a ferocious flurry of attacks, and Jack is on Tommy, and if he doesn’t do something about this, there will be blood spilled here. Blood watering the roots.

You know you could stop this, the Egg says, *you know that it is within your power, for I have offered you everything, everything you desire, and I shall give you fire and I shall give you rest and I shall give you your brother’s safety assured and he will not be harmed by me and mine and we shall look after him, for now and for always, he shall be mine as all creatures must be or perish but he shall be safe, and you can rest knowing you have done everything and have everything you want in the end, and it can all be yours and you know this.*

“Shut up,” he says. “Shut up.” Just a few more steps. Why does he feel so far from them when he’s only a few steps away? Just a few more steps and he can join the battle, can drive them back and away from those he’s sworn to protect,

(but these were his countrymen and he swore to protect them too and now look at them all children in a war that spiraled out of their control and never ended the soldiers never coming home because there was no home to return to and so the soldiers keep on marching on and they cannot learn to put their weapons down because there is no place to let them rest and no assurance of safety and the war continues whether seen or unseen and the soldiers keep on marching on)

and he can draw his sword even though his swordplay has never been his strongest suit.

Except, no, he needs to use the sword for something else, needs to—the Egg has to be the priority, because if he destroys the Egg, then this will all come to a close, and—

Then you have a choice to make, child of flames and of destruction, the Egg says, and it sounds terribly, horribly amused, and he can’t help but clutch the side of his head as it seems to laugh at him, awful and grating, like his skull has fractured and the shards are being driven into his brain. *You have a choice to make, and shall you try to save the ones you hold dear and shall your efforts be fruitless, or shall you raise your hand against me, shall you defy that which you know you seek, that which you know you love, shall you raise a hand against me and fail again, shall you call yourself child of failure and lay your impotency bare.*

And then, the Egg stops.

I see, it says. *You have a sword.*

He inhales sharply.

(it’s in your head and it knows it knows it knows your mind is its for the taking and now it knows)

Niki draws back from Tubbo, face twisting. Tubbo comes to stand beside Tommy again, protectiveness screaming in every line of his stance. Even Jack pauses, and Fundy looks up at him, tears in his eyes, shoulders shaking.

Tommy is staring at him, on his face a dawning dismay.

A sword blessed by the universe and granted by the shell of what was once a god, the Egg says, and suddenly, Wilbur can feel—something else. Something *through* the Egg, something else looking at him, aware of him. Something that feels like the Egg, but isn’t quite, and he thinks—it’s Dream. Dream is watching, though Dream is blocks away, fighting a battle of his own. *A sword meant to destroy the void stuff, the darkness, the corruption, a sword you believe will avail you.*

It speaks, and the whole room can hear it. Its voice reverberates in more minds than just his.

You are a thing of dust and ash and soot, and the name you chose for yourself was a prophesy, the Egg says, and you may pretend to have the strength to raise your steel high and drive it against me, you may pretend, but I know you better than you know yourself and I know that even if you had the strength, you would fail, because you have a choice to make and there is only one correct path, only one way out for you, only one way, and you will see it, and you will take it, and what use will your sword be, then?

“You talk a big game for something that the universe itself has sided against,” he says, rather proud of himself for stringing such a coherent sentence together, even while he desperately searches for what the Egg means, what it’s talking about. Because this is a trap, he knows. Likely intended for him. But what the Egg means by a choice, he has no clue, unless it means the choice it’s been trying to get him to make all along, but—

And then, as one, Niki and Jack move. Jack dives for Tubbo, catching him off guard, and there is a terrible snap as Tubbo hits the ground, and Tubbo *screams*. Tommy shouts, and Wilbur curses, trying to aim for Jack, but there’s too much movement, too much that could go wrong if he misses, because Jack has got Tubbo pinned down, still screaming, each scream interspersed with curses, and Jack doesn’t look like his weight could possibly keep Tubbo there, but somehow, all his struggles accomplish nothing. And even as he and Tommy both move forward to help, and even as Fundy seems to be shaking himself out of his stupor, Niki launches herself forward and puts her blade to Tommy’s throat.

And everything goes still.

A choice, the Egg repeats. And Wilbur understands.

“I want to kill him now,” Niki says, her eyes locked on the Egg. And then she scowls, whatever the Egg tells her not for the ears of anyone else, but while she presses the blade further against Tommy’s bare throat, drawing a thin line of blood, she does not cut down. “A choice, then,” she repeats, shifting her gaze to him, and her expression is something like anger and something like defeat. “I wonder if you even know how to make the right one.”

“Let me go,” Tubbo is saying, between sobs. Something is surely broken, but Wilbur can’t get a good enough look to see what. And moving closer may very well spell Tommy’s demise. “Fuck you, let me go, let him go.”

“Just, fuck, just settle down, would you?” Jack demands. “This’ll all be over soon.”

Niki is still watching him.

You have no control here, no power, and here is the choice.

“Wilbur,” Tommy says. His voice trembles. He swallows, and the action pushes his skin just slightly closer to the blade’s edge. More blood trickles down. “Wilbur, you—what is it asking you?”

But he says it like someone who already knows.

(and his brother has a sword to his throat and still seems more concerned for him than for himself and it breaks his heart just as it always does again and again and again)

You may strike your blow, you may take your shot, and no one here will impede your path, and if that is your choice then so be it, the Egg says, but know that should that be, your brother will fall and his blood will sustain me, and behind you his life will fade away even as you toss him aside to strike at me, but it does not have to be this way, void seeker. It does not have to be this way, and you can make the right choice, and the peace you want will be yours, and your brother will live.

He draws in a breath. The beginnings of a plan hatch in his mind. Desperate, crazy—but then, what up to this point hasn't been? He's out of options, has let himself be outplayed, and he can't even let himself think about this too hard, or else it will pluck the idea straight from his mind and it will all be for naught. But he has to try.

There really is only one choice to make.

Tommy's expression changes.

"No," he says, "no, no, no, whatever you're thinking, don't you fucking do it, don't you—it'll be alright, it'll be alright, I swear, just kill the thing, just kill it, don't, don't worry about me, don't" —He takes in a shuddering, gasping breath, and when he continues, he's no longer talking to Wilbur— "don't hurt them, please, you can *have* me, you can, but don't hurt them, you can't, and, and Tubbo, Tubbo, it's gonna be okay, 'cause, 'cause you're still yourself without me too, and it's gonna be, it's gonna be, just, please, Wil, please don't—"

"Tommy," he says, and Tommy falls silent. Tubbo does too. They're all looking at him, and he can't look at any of their faces for too long, Tubbo's scrunched up in pain and anger and Fundy's open wide, almost childlike in his—disbelief, perhaps. He can't look at their faces, because that makes it hurt worse.

The Egg doesn't say anything. Nothing he can hear, at least. But it's waiting. And it feels victorious.

"Tommy," he says again, "Tubbo. Fundy."

He breathes in. And out.

"Sometimes things are never meant to be," he says, and he doesn't know where the words are coming from, but he lets them flow. "Sometimes things are destined to end even from the very beginning."

"Wilbur, please—"

"But not this. Not us." He pauses. "Do you trust me?"

Tommy's face crumples. He doesn't respond. Fundy takes in a long, shaky breath, and for a moment, that's all he can hear. No one really answers him, and he supposes that in the end, that's an answer in and of itself.

But that's alright.

He turns to the Egg.

"Our deal," he says. "The one you offered me. I want it extended. I want everyone in this room alive and safe."

Everyone in this room. That includes Niki. That includes Jack. Because they were his countrymen, and he owes them this much. Owes them his best effort, even when his best effort once meant their destruction.

(because they were once his countrymen and they were once his friends, and what a picture they make now, and what a picture they made then, back in the summer heat with the walls high and proud around them, as they messed with a camera in their military uniforms, smiling and laughing and free, and it is easy for him to forget that L'Manberg was something beautiful once but it was, it was, it was, and they were beautiful too, and the world was laid at their feet, and they took that photo and he wonders where all the copies went, whether any still exist or whether they all went up in flames, and they were six then and they are six now, the same six, and how bitter and twisted they have all become, how far from that hazy memory of peace they all are)

(and how fitting, perhaps, that it should be the six of them here and only these six, here where it all will come to a close one way or the other, ending just as it began on that sunny summer's day)

"Wilbur, stop—"

It is nothing to me, the Egg says, and he can feel it, still, can feel it pressing in around him, ready to swamp him, ready to pull him under, and he can hear the whispers, too, just the same as they have always been, whispering fire, whispering death, and he can feel himself begin to lean into them already, can feel himself tempted, can feel his own longing.

And he can still feel, beyond the Egg, Dream watching. Waiting. Considering.

"Fine, then," he says, and traps his last apology under his tongue. "A deal."

And he lets the static claim him.

It rushes in around him, and the red dives in eagerly, filling out all the corners of his mind, all the spaces and all the cracks, and he remembers this, remembers this sensation from before, remembers how the Egg coaxed him, persistent and careful, and this is not quite like that, because then, it was like a siren singing a victim to a willing drowning, and now, it as if the entire ocean has opened over his head, a red sea.

There you are, and it is a homecoming, isn't it, the Egg croons, and his breath stutters in his chest, *and I know what you want, I know you long for the fire's murmurs and the explosion that you once caused and the end of your symphony, forever unfinished, and you were wrested back to this world so cruelly and without your permission, and you do not want to be*

here, you long for the darkness and the rest of the void, you wish for it with every fiber of your being and you only need listen to me and you can have it.

Yes. He's having a hard time remembering why he spent so much effort on resisting. Why he resisted the drumbeats that now ring out in his head, a rhythm of war, of blood and of fire, a rhythm that will send him to sleep, if he lets it, and he wants to let it, because the Egg says it is so, and he has let it in, has let it take him over, and the Egg is right. The Egg is right.

(the Egg says it is so, and the Egg must be right, feels right, right like nothing he has ever felt before, but so then why does he)

Come forward, then, and let me grant to you what is yours, the Egg commands, and his feet step forward, once, twice, three times, taking him closer. Behind him, someone is sobbing.

"Wil," someone whispers, and it sounds like his son. He doesn't turn around.

Your mind is laid bare to me, and all that you are is mine, the Egg says. *I can read your plan, and you thought you could fool me, could take yourself close with none the wiser and break free of my guidance, break free of me and strike before harm could befall your brother, but you cannot be free, because you do not want to be free, because I am giving you everything you want. Did you think you could do as you did before and claw yourself away from me using thoughts of your brother? There is nothing there to use, for I have assured his safety, and you know that.*

He does know that. He's pretty sure that was indeed his plan,

(was it?)

but why shouldn't the Egg know it now? The Egg is going to give him everything, is going to give him what he could have had before if he was not taken from the room as he was, and now that he is with it again, beating in his mind, a consistent pounding pulse, he feels that jubilation fill him, a hot, heady joy, settling sickly sweet in his gut.

This is right. This is how it was always going to happen. This was meant to be. And the Egg is right; it will be a homecoming, in more ways than one. The void awaits him, and with the Egg curling around him, almost smothering him, he remembers how badly he wants to answer the void's call, how badly he wants to be dead again, because he made himself an ending and never asked for the story to restart, and it's unfair that more has been demanded of him.

You played your part, and they were fools to think that you could ever be anything better than what you were, the Egg whispers. *You have not changed from the bitter thing you became, and they could not have expected more from you, should not have thought that this would end in any other way, because the void hums like a siren and you want to go, and I will take you there, and you will bleed out before me and feel peace at last and nothing more will be wanted of you. Drop your totem.*

Ah, yes, his totem. The one that Techno gave him. He summons it from his inventory, feels its weight against his palm, cold and solid. Its emerald eyes gleam up at him. And then, he

goes to drop it, as the Egg says. Somehow, he ends up tossing it over his shoulder instead, rather hard. He's not sure where it lands. He doesn't look.

Dream watches. Dream feels—smug. He ignores him. The Egg is what matters.

People are still talking to him. Crying, maybe, but it's all fallen away, become white noise. There is him, and the Egg, and what the Egg will give him, as long as he does exactly as it commands him. It is as a god, and he is as its vassal, and that is what he's always striven for.

You love to be useful, the Egg agrees, will abase yourself to anyone to earn your worthiness to live.

(Phil's voice, steady, sure, and loved: *you don't need to do anything to be worthy of love, you don't need to do anything to deserve to take care of yourself*)

And I know you, the Egg continues, better than you have known yourself. You wanted the fire, wanted to see it all burn around you, and the glee that filled you when you pressed that button was like none you had ever felt.

(no, that's wrong)

And that same glee again, when you had your father run your sword through your chest, and how eager you were to die, and how eager you are now, how eager, how eager, and you are the same creature you were then, at your core.

(wrong, something about what it's saying is wrong because these are thoughts he's had himself so very often but)

A few steps more, and he's standing next to the Egg. Close enough to touch it. He almost wants to, but doesn't, something holding him back.

His head pounds. Throbs. Each breath comes as a struggle, though why he's trying so hard, he doesn't know.

And you are mine, the Egg croons, my creature now, and I can do with you as I will, but I will give you what you seek so desperately, can you feel it?

He can. He can feel it, the red, soothing as it always has been, and every inch of him cries out for it, cries out for what he

(but does he?)

wants.

And you shall have it, the Egg says. You shall have it.

They're all calling to him. All of them, but Tommy most of all, calling his name, begging him to stop. He doesn't turn, even now. Part of him wants to, but when he thinks about it, the Egg pulses in his mind, burning him, expressing displeasure, and he won't go against what the Egg wants, not when it is about to gift him everything, not when it understands him so well.

So he does not turn, and—distantly, he thinks that this was the idea. To use Tommy to pull himself out again, just as he did before. But it won't work this time, because Tommy is going to be safe. The Egg has sworn that he will be unharmed.

You never had a hope of resisting me, the Egg says, as I know you as no one else does, and I know what you want, and you shall have it now.

Vines creep around his ankles, slide around his legs, his arms. And one rests around his neck, lightly, but he can feel the thorns. They're a caress, an embrace,

(but you know what an embrace is like and this is not that you know that this is not that because an embrace is Phil's wings or Tommy's face in your shoulder or Techno gripping your shoulders and pulling you in and you know better you know better)

a promise.

(but something isn't right and his mind stirs and there is disquiet hesitation that even the red cannot drown out)

You wanted fire and to let it all burn down around you, and you wanted it all to end, and if you cannot have the fire again, your fire you so love, if you cannot dance victorious on the wreckage then you will have the dark.

The vines tighten. And through the red, Wilbur realizes what's wrong.

(because here is a secret you keep locked away: you love the fire not for what it is, but for what it granted you, for the ending so desired, but the fear has never left you, the fear instilled in your veins the first time your country went up in a blaze and your people fell around you and it was no game, and here is the second secret: you fear the fire, and at the last, you decided you deserved to die afraid)

(it all comes down to deserving)

It's difficult to think. Difficult to wade through the red haze, but this—this is important, because the Egg is going—is going to give him what he *wants*, so why does it—it's supposed to understand him, so why—

(it all comes down to deserving, and what he thinks he deserves, and the Egg is in his head, and what is the Egg drawing from if not his own thoughts, but the thing about his thoughts is that they might be)

“That's not what I wanted,” he whispers. “It's not what I want.”

The Egg presses in further, and he can feel it in his head, pulling at his thoughts, at his emotions, telling him that he is wrong, that this is what he wants, but he stands his ground, because—his head's a mess, but he—he doesn't—

(Phil's voice again, careful and sad and gentle and kind, because for all his father's faults he has never doubted that he loves him, and Phil's voice says, *remember that you do deserve*

better things, and there's an implication in there that Phil thinks that what he believes he deserves is wrong, and he hasn't really had time to think that over, but)

The vine tightens around his throat. The thorns dig into his skin. Not breaking it, not yet.

"You're offering me what I think I deserve," he says, and it's like coming up for air, if only for a moment, and finding that the sky is still blue. For a second, he exists outside of himself, outside of the hooks the Egg has dug into him, and he can experience its presence for the horror that it is. And then the red takes him again, and he's drowning, suffocating, his lungs full of syrup, and the Egg is unhappy, and part of him wants to grovel and apologize and do anything to be sure that he receives his due, and the Egg speaks again and rakes its voice across his body, and he shudders violently.

Then what is it that you think you want? it asks, and it is angry and it is patronizing, and it is pushing up against him, twisting him, forcing him to agree with it, to believe its words, and half of him does and the other half comes up for air again, bobbing in the open ocean, sharks circling, and that gives him just enough room to consider the question, to truly consider it.

What does he want?

(freedom, once, freedom and choice and a place to call his, a place where he and his loved ones would be safe, and he built the walls as both practicality and symbol, and he wanted to protect, wanted to lead, wanted a land that was good and a land that was free)

If he could have anything, anything at all, what would he—

You want rest, the Egg hisses, *and you know it, know that you are the villain and you deserve death, and you want rest and you want peace, to be released from this world that is cruel and corrupt and full of darkness, to be released from your responsibilities, you want rest and I will give it to you—*

Yes, perhaps, but

(Tommy smiles at him with sunlight in his hair and in his eyes and Tubbo grins sharp and sure and Fundy is with him and no longer regards him with hatred and Techno has a book in his hand and his voices are quiet and Phil stares on and his posture is straight and not bent with guilt and with pain)

(and he is with them, and he has so far to go, but he is happy)

(and if he puts all of himself aside, puts aside his self-loathing and his fears, puts aside all the harm he knows he has done and all of the punishment he knows he still deserves, then that is what he's always wanted, isn't it? his family with him, the days stretching on, and here is a realization, breaking like the dawn itself: he hasn't ever thought that he deserves to be happy, but he wants it, he wants it, he wants it, just as he wants to be a better man, he wants to be happy again, he wants, even if he doesn't deserve he *wants*)

he has always wanted rest. Since coming back, he has wanted rest. But he is still here.

He decided to be better, and perhaps he's not doing a very good job of it in any sense of the word, but he decided, and he's sticking to it, and that is what he wants. More than death, he wants another chance.

He wants to stay. Not only for other people, but for himself, too. He wants to stay, and he wants to stay more than he wants to die.

Admitting as much lifts a weight from his chest, one that he hadn't known was there at all.

Then I shall give you that, as well, the Egg says, and for the first time, he hears it: desperation. Slowly, surely, the red begins to clear, leaving him with shaking limbs and a headache that makes it difficult to focus, but the Egg's voice is no longer so welcoming, the red no longer so appealing, and he hurts, and he hears Tommy's broken protests, Tubbo's sobs, Fundy's whimpering, he can hear them, and they tug at his heartstrings where only a moment before, he ignored them, so sure of his course as he was, so sure of his course as it made him.

He's pulled himself out. He pulled himself out, and he did it himself, with shaking, bloody fingers, and he hasn't climbed back over the top of the cliff yet, but he's hanging on. He's hanging on. He's stopped his fall.

(and he doesn't know what healing is doesn't know what it is to be better but perhaps here, now, he can admit to himself that being better includes being better to himself, too, and he has never allowed himself to think as much before but perhaps it is truth, and perhaps he can let himself hope, and what a time it is to finally come to this conclusion but something of truth rings in it and he knows that this is right)

They will be happy, the Egg says, *and they will be alive, and I will keep them safe, and you will be happy as well, and you will have what you desire.*

The words are like hands, pulling on him. But he can recognize as much. Recognize the sensation, slimy and insidious, of something else trying to change his thoughts, trying to reach in and change *him*. The ground beneath his feet feels more stable now, his footing found at last. He almost let himself slip. Almost, but he's found footholds, handholds, and he did it himself, and that feels important.

"You and Dream are the same," he murmurs, and he can feel it paying attention, feel it wanting to know what he's about to say. And beyond it, somewhere further away, he thinks he can still sense Dream looking, too, Dream watching him, listening to them. "You're always so eager to talk. So certain that you're right. But you're too prideful, and that's the end of you." He summons his best glare. Plants his feet. Playing his hand like this is not wise, but somehow, he knows that the Egg will let him finish, will let him get to the end of his speech before trying anything. It wants to know. Even now, it is prideful, sure it can contain him, that he will not be able to harm it. "Even knowing what my plan was, you let me get close. You assumed you could overwhelm me. You thought I'd be yours. And for a minute, you did. I was. But do you want to know what your biggest mistake was?"

The vine around his neck tightens.

“Even when you knew you were losing me, you still let me talk,” he finishes, and in one movement, drops the sword into his hand

(and he can hear the universe again, can hear it humming, vibrating against his skin, and he burns with it)

and slices through the vine before it can strangle him. In the next second, he drives it forward, putting all his weight behind it, and shoves it into the Egg.

It slides in like a knife through butter, and several things happen at once.

Behind him: chaos. Chaos that he can only hear and not see, but several people shout, and then Jack Manifold cries out, and there is another clash of metal, and then Tommy shouts, not in pain but rather a loud, wordless denial, and there is a great cracking sound, like the air tearing itself apart, and the golden flash reflects off even the Egg’s surface, and the room crackles like ozone, like a bend in reality, and it is the activation of a totem, and he can only hope that it will be enough.

And the Egg screams.

It is like a thousand voices crying out in a thousand discordant notes, like several hundred orchestras all out of tune in different ways, like a shriek of violins and a moan of tubas and the drums stutter and falter and tap out infinitely different rhythms until it’s all a clanging, howling mess of static and white noise and still, something screaming, something old and powerful and terrible in its death throes.

He screams too, he thinks. He can’t hear himself anymore. Can barely feel himself, though he tries to tighten his fingers on the hilt of the sword.

At the edge of his perception, the universe encroaches. Humming, humming, and for a second, they harmonize with him, and in that second, the universe says,

(you did well, and now look, look upon your adversary and know what they are, know the darkness and the corruption and the rot and the sickness)

And he does look, and he sees

(the Egg indeed is not an Egg and for this second, for this one moment in time and out of time, he sees it for what it is, something incomprehensible, something existing against all the laws of the world, all things natural, a blight, a bug, a twist in the code that makes up all things, a virus, and even despite that, it was not done growing, not done gathering strength, and one more sacrifice would have done it, glutted as it was on Dream’s shared power and the blood of the Blood God, one more meal would have done it, and he was close to being that meal, inches away from dying and giving it what it needed to hatch, and perhaps it would have kept its promise, perhaps it would have allowed his loved ones to live, but it would have been no life, no life at all, under the control of a thing that at its core sought to devour worlds)

But the universe says,

(but it is well, it is well, for your strength was enough and you are stronger than you know, and you are worthy and you have come to the beginnings of understanding, and you realize now that you are deserving of the world, that you deserve to live, and you want to live and to make yourself better, and you are deserving of time, and we are with you, and you are not alone, and you have freedom now to make it all right)

A million stars twinkle in his vision, and then, he comes back to himself. There is no more screaming. No more whispering. His head is quiet.

He still holds the sword. But the Egg itself is shriveling, blackening, twisting, collapsing in on itself, and as he watches, it and all its vines become husks, dark and small. He draws the sword out, and the area around it crumbles to dust.

It seems so small. So small, so impotent. But it is a corpse now, he supposes, so that is only right. Relief floods him.

It's over. At last, it is over. The Egg is gone.

The sword no longer shimmers, no longer shines. The runes are only shapes, now, not glowing, not humming. It has served its purpose; it's just a sword, now, like any other sword, and he's tired of holding swords. He never was much good with them anyway. So he puts it back in his inventory, and turns

(and as he does, he catches a glimpse of something in the husk, in the shriveled shell, something impossibly blue, but that can wait)

around, and in that motion, his heart stops beating.

Only for a moment before it starts up again, but its rhythm is stuttering, weak, too quick and too slow by turns. He wonders if that's something he should be concerned about. He feels no pain, though his body seems rather numb, now that he's thinking about it. What's important now, though, is the scene in front of him, because they're all alive. All of them, alive. Tommy is hugging Tubbo, tightly, like he thinks he'll disappear, and Tubbo himself glitters with gold, shimmering all around him. He had to use the totem, then.

He tries not to think about what would have happened if he hadn't thrown it behind him. He's pretty sure that he was trying to give them a failsafe, even under the Egg's thrall as he was, but he can't be sure. Can't trust his memories of only a few minutes ago, probably.

Niki and Jack are both on the ground, surrounded with dust from the crumbling vines. Their eyes are closed, but their chests rise and fall. They'll be fine, then, and relief mixes with sorrow; they're not under the Egg's control any longer, but he knows better than to think that means all is fixed. Fundy has staggered to his feet, is hovering by Tommy and Tubbo, face still tear-stained.

But he's fine. He's okay. They're all okay.

He lets out a breath, and takes a step forward. It's more difficult than it should be. Pain flares in his—flares everywhere, actually, his abdomen and chest and limbs, and his head is still

killing him, though that much, at least, doesn't surprise him. But then, it dies down, replaced by the numbness again.

Tommy pulls back from Tubbo. "You ever do something like that again, I'm killing you myself, Tubbo, *fuck*," he says, and Tubbo laughs, a little tearfully. And then, Tommy rounds on him. "And you, what the fuck did you think you were doing? How stupid are you?"

"A bit stupid," he agrees. The words come out slurred. He frowns, and so does Tommy. Or at least, he thinks that he frowns. He can't feel his face. Tommy is definitely frowning, though, and then Tommy is walking toward him, or stumbling, more like, and then all three of them are.

"Are you good?" Tommy asks. "You're making weird faces."

"That was a good throw, with the totem," Tubbo says, almost at the same time. Where Tommy stands right in front of him, Tubbo goes around to stand at his side, looking him up and down with narrowed eyes, narrowed eyes that flicker with golden light. He'll crash once the magic burns itself out, though it shouldn't be nearly as bad as what Techno went through. He keeps rolling his shoulder, flexing his arm, as if shaking out a wound that is no longer there. "Saved my skin, there. But man, that was a risky play."

"I can't believe it worked," Fundy says quietly. "I thought the Egg could read thoughts. I mean, I *felt* it in my head, man. It was awful. But how come it didn't know you were pretending?"

"Pretty sure he wasn't pretending," Tommy says, and—he wishes he didn't say that, because now still doesn't feel like the time to talk to Fundy about any of this, even though he probably should, at one point, because if he's going to be a better father, he ought to start by telling him things that he wants to know, despite the part of him that still screams to shelter him, screams that he's not ready to learn about such terrible things, but—he's grown. Fundy is grown. He needs to work on keeping that in mind.

"I just can't believe it's over," Tommy continues. "Just like that? After the days we've had? Feels anti-climatic—"

"Anti-climactic," Tubbo supplies.

"Oh, piss off. Anti-whatever, it feels all sudden, doesn't it? Though I suppose there's still Dream." Tommy's face darkens. "Guess we need to go see about everyone else."

"Uh, Wilbur?" Fundy breaks in, hesitant, but not angry. Not too upset. Perhaps concerned? Is Fundy concerned for him? "Your, um, your nose is bleeding."

Tommy and Tubbo go silent, and he blinks. Is it? He can't feel it, can't feel any blood dripping down, but he can't seem to move his arm to check. He can't seem to move anything, actually, and when he opens his mouth, intending to say something—though what, he has no idea—he finds his airway obstructed by something. He coughs, and their faces all go very alarmed.

“Oh, shit, he’s bleeding from his *mouth*,” Tubbo says, and at the same time, Tommy steps in closer, right up against him, and grabs his shoulders, peering into his face.

“Wil?” he says, and Wilbur would try to respond, he really would, but Tommy’s touch has chased away the numbness, starting at the points of contact and radiating outward and in its wake is—is too much, too much to think about, too much to describe, too much to handle, and he’s been stabbed and he’s been shot and none of that felt anything like this, because this feels like lava’s been poured down his throat and he’s burning alive from this inside out, and his lungs are having severe difficulty inhaling, and his chest is tight and he can’t feel his heartbeat so he thinks that maybe—

“Get him on the ground, get him down, get him down, oh, fuck—”

The world tips, and he’s lying down. The ceiling above is red, and dust drifts into his eyes. Dust from the vine husks, breaking apart as he watches them, crumbling into nothingness. It’s like watching ash fall. Like watching soot fall.

His chest constricts further, and he gasps for air. Air that doesn’t come. Air that doesn’t come, because, because—

They’re all talking over each other. He can barely follow the conversation. Dimly, he realizes that he’s quite panicked, though that fact itself has taken a backseat to the fact that he can’t breathe properly. Can’t breathe properly, because—

He thinks he might be dying, actually. He’d forgotten, how the Egg strikes back at those who strike it. He’d forgotten. He wonders if the universe did, too.

The vines aren’t burning, so there’s no ash falling. Not really. But there would be a twisted kind of poetry in it if they were, if it was flakes of soot tumbling down. Soot falling.

Soot falling.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter means a lot to me; I've been building to Wilbur's realization here for a while, so I hope it landed in the way I intended. As always, thank you all so much, from the bottom of my heart, for your support, and I'll see you next week.

[Here is my tumblr!](#)

Next up, Chapter Twenty-One: In which for every action, there is a consequence. This is a lesson that the server has learned well. (Or, the fallout, the final push, and something like the dust settling.)

morning sun

Chapter Notes

Deep breaths, everybody.

The response to last chapter was absolutely overwhelming. Thank you so much you guys for all your support, it really does mean so much to me.

Chapter warnings for swearing, blood, major injury, seizure, and character death.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He has a lot of thoughts on poetry. Poetry, he often finds, is just music without the tune. The rhythm is there already, and the words can be their own melody, if they're written right, with a shape and a contour and a buildup and a decrescendo. He knows poetry. And poetry can tell stories, too, can tell whole narratives, can show a hero's journey from the beginning to the bitter, bitter end, because something he noted a long time ago is that in the old stories, the old poems, in the meter and rhyme, there are few heroes who get happy endings. There are few stories that end with the hero growing old and finding peace. The heroes in the stories he was drawn to, the stories that Technoblade told him as they grew from children to lanky teenagers to adults, the heroes in those stories come to tragic ends.

So, he knows poetry.

Is there poetry in death?

Once, he would have said yes. Once, he would have said that death, perhaps, after a long fight, after a struggle lost, after all the world goes caving in and the hero stands alone knowing how far he has fallen, knowing there is only so much further to go, knowing that every cliff has its bottom and every sea its floor, after all of that—once, he might have said that death, after all of that, was the most poetic thing of all.

But he thinks he knows better now. He thinks that death is not poetry at all. He thinks that death is pain and suffering and hurting those who were left behind, and death is an ending that cannot

(is usually not, and perhaps he needs to examine that, too, needs to start considering himself lucky for the second chance that no one else ever gets, because he gasped back to life with mud between his fingers and rain in his eyes and there has been so much pain since then but there has been beauty and now revelation)

be revised once the pen has left the paper, and all the best stories are edited before they are consumed.

But life is not a story, and he is a person, not a role, even if that thought turns everything upside-down, forces him to consider everything he thought he knew about the axis on which the world spins.

And dying cannot be poetry, because he thinks he is dying, and there is nothing lovely about it at all. Not now.

(and not then, either, though you were not ready to know it)

“Shut up, you’re not fucking dying,” Tommy says, and with the words come a wash of cold clarity, focus that he clings to desperately. It might be a mistake, because the pain comes back to the forefront, too, sharp and everywhere and overwhelming and he wants to retreat from it, and he thinks he’s going to retreat from it, if it keeps on like this, so it’s a matter of how long he can manage to hold on.

He’s only just recovered his footing. He’s not going to let himself slip away. Not when he’s only just figured out he wants to keep standing.

And then his heart spasms, sending a burst of hot pain ricocheting in his chest, and he is reminded that he might not have a choice in the matter. He tries to draw in breath, and finds his airways blocked. He tastes iron on his tongue. He tries to draw in breath, and he *can’t*, and his lungs are burning, burning—

“Turn his head,” Tubbo says sharply, “turn it, he’s choking—”

Someone wrenches his head to the side. He coughs, once, twice, and then he’s wracked with them, curling in on himself as best he can, hands coming up to clutch at his chest, his throat, and he can feel the blood spilling from his mouth, pooling in his cheek and splattering on his lips. Blood. It waters the vines, the vines that are turning to dust. The blood vines are watered, and nothing at all happens, because the vines are dead.

The vines are dead, and he is dying, because he’s pretty sure that his internal organs are all giving out.

“He’s coughing up blood,” Fundy says, near hysterically, “why is he coughing up blood, what’s wrong with him—?”

“The Egg hurts you when you hurt it,” Tommy answers, matching his tone, his high pitch, his fear. “The Egg—and I fucking forgot, oh my god, why did I let him do it, we should’ve figured this would happen—”

“Does *anyone* have pots?” Tubbo demands. “Does anyone have pots, because I don’t.”

“I didn’t grab any,” Fundy says, “it all happened so fast, I didn’t think to grab any—”

“Wait, shit, I’ve got one,” Tommy says. “Here, c’mon.”

He feels hands on him, gently pushing him out of the position he’s folded himself into. And then, he’s leveraged to sit more upright, and he groans, something in his abdomen screaming in protest at the shift. He doesn’t have the strength to keep his head up, so he lets it fall back,

and it hits someone's chest. He's propped up against someone, and as his vision clears, just a bit, he sees Fundy crouched to one side, hands hovering over him, and Tommy kneeling right by him, tugging on the cork of a potion, so it's Tubbo that he's leaning against.

"Here, Wilbur, just," Tommy starts, and then the glass is being held to his lips. He parts his lips compliantly, and he feels the liquid slide across his tongue, but there's too much blood in his throat for it to go down smoothly, and in the next second, he's coughing again, sputtering, trying to suck air into a throat that's too clogged and lungs that won't quite inflate. He jerks, and Tubbo's arms come up from behind him, grabbing his shoulders and holding him steady even as his body tries to escape the inescapable.

"C'mon, Wil, *please*," Tommy says, and his eyes are wide and so very blue, and there's a sheen across them. Tears. He's making Tommy cry. "Please, you've got to swallow."

He can't get in a good enough breath to be able to tell him that he's trying, that he would very much like to swallow, it's only that absolutely nothing seems to be cooperating with him at the moment. But surely Tommy knows that, knows that he would if he could, and he'll keep trying, even though—even though everything *hurts*, and really, there's no other way to put it than that. Everything hurts, every inch of him, like his skin is being stretched too tight and he's boiling from the inside out.

(but then again, Tommy doesn't know the realization he's just come to, he just sees his brother limp on the ground and fading away before his eyes and coughing up the potion he's given him, coughing up what might be the best chance they have to save him, and that is what Tommy sees, so is there any wonder that he automatically assumes that)

No. No, he needs Tommy to know. He needs all of them to know that he doesn't want this, that he doesn't want to go, that he's not giving up.

Tommy presses the potion to his lips again, desperate, insistent. He parts them again, and this time, some of it goes down. A bit goes down the wrong pipe, in fact, setting him to coughing again, but that burn is nothing compared to everything else. He can feel the magic begin to take effect right away, racing inside of him, trying to repair what has been broken and torn apart, and because he can feel it at work, he can feel exactly what's wrong, can feel it try to patch holes inside of him that the Egg's death throes ripped open, can feel it surrounding his heart, trying to encourage it to beat in a steady rhythm again, can feel it in his lungs, trying to reopen one that has half-collapsed. He can feel it all, and he knows that even if he managed to down the whole flask, it wouldn't be enough. Not for this.

Because magic can only do so much. Because magic only goes so far.

Despair pools in his chest along with the fire, but he bucks against it, because he doesn't want

(he doesn't want to die and it took him so long to decide as much to understand himself enough to realize it and he doesn't want to die but his body is giving out even as he fights to stay and this cannot be how it ends, it cannot be, because the world is cruel and the world is unfair but he cannot believe that it would be so unjust as this, so unjust as to take away what he has only just realized he wants to keep)

(but then again, the world does not often listen, does not often care for what is good and what is fair, because the world simply is, and that was a lesson he learned long ago, chased from the podium, the arrow in his back, betrayal and desperation playing a counterpoint melody, and it would never have happened if fairness was something the world at large took into consideration)

(but then *again*, does the universe not listen, when it well and truly counts? though to say as much would be to imply that it never counted before, when it did, did and still does, still does, because perhaps he can heal if given the chance but he will not forget and neither will anyone else)

to die. He doesn't want to die. And if ever there was a moment to fight against despair, to fight against despair and win, for once, it is now. It is now.

"I'm trying," he gasps out, and then immediately has to stop, has to struggle for air again, his chest heaving. He's shaking, his bones trying to flee his skin.

"I know," Tommy says. "I know, just come on—" The potion is back, and it's the last of it, and he manages to force down some more. His vision sharpens, his breathing becoming just ever so slightly easier, but it's not going to be enough. His heart falters, skips several beats, sends deep pangs shooting through his ribcage, and he knows it's not going to be enough.

"I am trying," he insists, as soon as he has enough air for it, "I am, I don't—I don't want to go—"

He coughs. Something inside him shifts, grating against other things, and *fuck* but that hurts, and there's blood dribbling down his lips again. Hot and sticky. Damning.

"Okay, okay, that's good, you're not going anywhere," Tommy says, "you're not, we're not gonna let that happen—"

"Comms are still down," Fundy says. "I'm not getting through to anyone. Should I—should I go and get someone? I'm a fast runner, I can make it there and back."

No.

No, no, he—it makes sense, what Fundy is suggesting, but he doesn't want his son to leave him, because what if he leaves and he—he never gets to tell him all the things he wants to say, all the things he should have said a long, long time ago, what if he leaves and the last that Wilbur sees of him is his retreating back and that's all, that's all there is for either of them, what if he dies here and now and he never gets to—

(a scene, imagined: the sun setting over the water, a warm, lazy breeze rustling his hair, and they are sitting side by side, quiet and companionable, and they are fishing, their lures bobbing together in the lake, and all is not fixed and all is not forgotten but there is peace and forgiveness and an opportunity to repair the once-burnt bridge and he wants that he wants he wants)

He moves his arm. The first time, it flops back down uselessly, but he tries again, expends far more effort than he should, and he hooks his fingers into Fundy's sleeve. Fundy stills, and Wilbur looks at him. Really looks. Meets his eyes and keeps his gaze there. And he doesn't know what he looks like, doesn't know how bad he must appear at the moment, but though there is worry on his son's face, there is something else there, too, something more complicated.

"Wil?" Fundy says softly.

He might not get another chance for this.

"I love you," he says, and he can feel the words sliding into each other even as they leave his mouth, but he hopes he's comprehensible. He prays, because he needs Fundy to know this. "I love you, and—I'm so sorry I wasn't there. I'm so sorry. I wanted to be better this ti—"

His heart squeezes, like it's doing its level best to collapse in on itself, and he breaks off with a strangled squawking sort of noise. And Fundy makes an odd noise of his own.

"Shut up," he says. "You're not—you're going to be fine. Stop talking like you're going to—you can't leave again, okay, you can't do this to me again, you can't—"

He's hurting his son. Hurting his son just like he has all along, and he's powerless to stop it, powerless once again. And there is some measure of gladness in it, in knowing that Fundy does not want him dead, but he is hurting him, hurting him when he never wanted to do so again. When all he really wanted was a chance to make things better, if he could. If he would be allowed.

He tightens his grip on Fundy's sleeve. Fundy's face shutters, and then he reaches over with his other hand and pries his fingers off, and Wilbur thinks that actually he might die right here and now.

Except then, Fundy takes his hand and intertwines their fingers, clutching them tightly. He tries to squeeze back and only manages a flutter, but it's enough.

(because all is not well between you and perhaps it never will be, but know this, know that your son still loves you)

"I'm so sorry," Tubbo says suddenly, and he can't crane his neck to look at him, so he has to settle for listening to the words. "If I hadn't used the totem, maybe—"

"Oh my god, don't fucking say that," Tommy snaps, and Wilbur quite agrees, because if Tubbo hadn't used the totem, then perhaps this would feel very different, and perhaps he would not be terrified of the sensation of his life slipping away from him, because he would have death's most effective preventative measure resting in his hand, waiting for his heart to still in order to repair the damage. But if Tubbo hadn't used the totem—and he didn't see exactly what happened, occupied as he was, but he can guess well enough from the still-present echoes of terror on Tommy's face—then Tubbo would be dead. And that is not an acceptable loss.

“It’s the truth,” Tubbo insists.

“No,” he forces out, “no, that wouldn’t—that wouldn’t be any better—”

And then, his muscles seize. His back arches, and he hears himself cry aloud, and then the world goes away for a bit.

When it all returns, it crashes in on him at once, and he feels disoriented, exhausted, like his brain is seeking anything recognizable, anything to help make sense of what’s happening, and coming up with nothing. It takes a moment for him to remember where he is, what’s just happened, and even then, he feels dazed, almost outside of himself. He still hurts, but it’s distant. Like it’s happening to someone else.

He’s lying fully on the ground. There’s something soft under his head. A jacket? There is no one holding his hand, and a low keen rips itself from his throat. But no one’s listening—sound filters back in, and it takes effort to parse the voices from each other, speaking over themselves as they are.

“—going,” Fundy is saying, and Fundy, *Fundy*, he’d like Fundy to come back and be next to him, but he forces his head to flop to the side and sees that Fundy is standing now, standing with the rest of them. “I’m going, we need help, he’s—he’s literally dying right now—”

“He’s not fucking dying,” Tommy says, “would you stop saying that, he’s not—”

“If you’re gonna go get help, then go and hurry up about it,” Tubbo is saying at the same time, and—

That’s right. He’s dying. He might have just had a seizure. That’s probably what that was. Caused by—seizures can be caused by traumatic brain things, right? Injuries? Having the Egg fucking around in there probably counts, and even beside that, he felt it die, felt it as the power of the universe flowed through the sword in its hand and tore it apart, even as it took him down with it.

(and there are some things that a mortal mind is not meant for, and surely, surely, the universe in its glory and its infinity is one of them and yet it is in your head always humming always there and it will not leave even when you do not pay it heed)

So that’s that. He’s just had a seizure, and he thinks his body’s gotten to the point where it’s given up on trying to fix anything, because the pain is fading, fading back into numbness, as if all his nerves have collectively decided that this situation is a little too fucked up and there’s nothing they can do, no point in working on it anymore. No point in signaling that anything’s wrong when nothing’s being fixed.

He’s dying.

(he doesn’t want to go)

“No way he gets back in time,” someone says. “You’ve got minutes at most.”

He's not sure who spoke, but he agrees. Short of a miracle, he's—he's dying, and he wants to cry, because he doesn't want to go. His surroundings blur.

He's alone. Why isn't anyone next to him? They're standing, around him but not with him, talking to each other, voices so frantic and scared, and they're just kids, and it's so unfair that any of this is being put on them at all, and he doesn't blame them for it, of course, but he thinks that if anyone was going to go for help, it should have been done right away. Not now. It's not going to do any good now.

If he's going to die, he doesn't want to be alone.

(he intended to die alone, at the end of it all. he intended for himself to be the only one to be hurt. that's one of the only reasons why he didn't blow it all to hell sooner, because people were there, people talked him down, people like Quackity, people like Tommy, and they didn't talk him out of wanting to do it but their presence reminded him that he didn't want them to be hurt, he only wanted himself to hurt, because that was what was fair and that was what was right)

(but he didn't die alone, at the end of it all. Phil held him, and he felt a little less afraid under all that relief, and the last thing he remembers from that day is warmth overwhelming, and if he's going to die again, he doesn't want to be cold, alone, alone)

He tries to talk, to say something, but he really is having trouble breathing now. His chest rises and falls in quick, short pants, too shallow to supply enough oxygen, too little to support his voice. He tries to move to get their attention, but his limbs don't respond to his commands.

And then, Fundy's taking off, running for the entrance, and no, no, no—

He finally manages to meet Tommy's gaze. Tommy's crouched by him again in an instant, and Tubbo is, too, grabbing his hand, and he's glad of it, glad for the contact, but—

"It's okay," Tommy tells him. "You're gonna be fine, Wilbur, Fundy's gonna go get someone, and they'll bring more pots, and, and another totem, too—"

His vision is darkening. He wants Fundy to come back. His heartbeats are growing more erratic, slower, weaker.

"Tommy," Tubbo says, voice small, and stops. Tommy goes silent for a moment.

"No," he says, then, and his voice is a sob. Wilbur wants to comfort him. He can't move. "No, no, this isn't *fair*—"

He knows. He knows, and he can't do a thing about it.

"I—" he manages, pushing the word out with what little air is circulating through his lungs. "I don't want—"

He can't finish.

“I know you don’t want to go,” Tommy says, “I know, so, so you won’t, you won’t, you’re going to be *fine*—”

“We’re here, Wilbur,” Tubbo says. “We’re right here.”

He’s glad. He wants to stay with them.

“Jesus, Wilbur.” There’s that voice again. Not Tommy’s, not Tubbo’s. Soft and exasperated, and perhaps a little bit concerned, but he’s not sure. His ability to think, to reason, is slipping from his grasp, and on some level, that terrifies him, but on another, he can no longer care. “You giving up?”

The peculiar combination of derision and amusement is familiar. He opens his eyes; he hadn’t realized he’d closed them. Above him, a face hovers, upside-down from his vantage point. Dark hair, scruff, chipped horns, a blue sweater. Schlatt.

How long has he been here?

“Is this how you’re gonna go out?” Schlatt asks him. “Taken out by a—whatever the hell this was? You know, I’m still not clear on that. None of you assholes ever explained it to me. Some kind of demon bullshit. But you’re just gonna let this happen?”

Somehow, his voice cuts through the haze that’s filled his mind, cuts through even where Tommy and Tubbo’s voices have blended together, becoming one with the background. Perhaps it’s the sudden burst of annoyance, an energy he thought he no longer had; of course he’s not *letting* this happen. There’s just not a whole lot he can do to fight against acute organ failure. Does he look as if he planned this?

“You don’t want to go, though,” Schlatt says. “I heard that. Good on you, I guess. Deciding that life’s worth something after all. I’m real proud.”

He tries to glare at him. He has no idea whether his face is doing anything or not. If it is, he hopes that the boys don’t think he’s mad at them.

“Okay,” Schlatt says. “Okay, you know what? Let’s give this a try. You’re a real jackass, though, you know that? I want to make sure you know that. I need you to remember that to the end of your days. I want you to put it on your tombstone when you do finally kick it. Here lies Wilbur Soot, he was a real jackass.”

He doesn’t understand what Schlatt is trying to say. He’s rambling, as if to himself. And the world is sliding away again.

(he’s trying to hold on but there’s only so much he can do if the entire cliff face gives way there’s only so much he can do to fight against it there’s only so much)

But then, he feels it. The tether. The rope that binds them. The trailing connection. It opens up, pulling like gravity on his heart, and there’s that familiar sensation, energy leaving him, flowing down the line, except this is energy that he truly doesn’t have to spare, and the last embers of his panic flare up again, because surely Schlatt can feel it, can feel that he has

nothing to give, that this is only going to kill him quicker, within seconds if he keeps this up and he may not have much of a chance here but he doesn't need Schlatt making it *worse*—

“Holy shit!” he hears Tubbo say, backed up by, “What the fuck are you doing?” from Tommy an instant later. He can't see them. He can't see anything. Their voices are far away, and he's trying to reach them, but he's falling, and he can't stop it, can't stop himself, and the void is close.

(and he's scared)

“Hey Tubbo,” he hears Schlatt say. Distantly, from a long way away, and getting quieter. Everything is dim. He's floating. “You deserved better than me, kid, you really did.” A pause. “Tell Fundy the same thing, would you?”

His heart beats. Once. Twice. And then does not beat again. He'd be in pain if he could still feel it. But it's all gone. All falling away, and the void is close, the void is reaching out to him, and he is—

And then, the tether reverses.

Energy flows back into him. What Schlatt took, and somehow, inextricably—*more*.

He slams back into himself all at once, gasping for air, back arching off the ground as he is hit with—everything. Sensation, in his fingers, in his toes. Pain, in every inch of him, every atom. Lungs that inflate, barely at first and then more fully. Ruptured places repairing themselves. A heart that starts again, and beats, beats, beats.

“C'mon,” Schlatt is muttering, over and over, and though Tommy and Tubbo are still talking, it's the only voice he can latch onto. “C'mon, c'mon.” His hand is splayed across Wilbur's chest, firm and solid, pressing down. “C'mon.”

He has sight again. Schlatt is still there, is still leaning over him, strain written on every line of his face, and Wilbur doesn't understand, doesn't understand what he's doing, doesn't understand where this energy is coming from, doesn't understand how it's—healing him. It's healing him. Though—Schlatt is a ghost, is usually intangible, has to rely on Wilbur's lifeforce if he wants to do anything, but perhaps that doesn't mean Schlatt has none of his own. Perhaps it's just not enough to sustain him. Perhaps it's not enough to form him a body, not enough to create life from death.

But perhaps it's enough for this.

Just as he works through it, Schlatt loses his solidity. His hand slips down, passing through Wilbur's chest, and he shudders at the sensation, tingling and cold. But Schlatt doesn't pull away, and the energy keeps flowing, and then, Schlatt starts to flicker, his form wavering in and out of reality.

And finally, Wilbur thinks he understands.

(reciprocity is something they both know well, and a connection once opened can flow both ways)

“You’re giving too much,” he says, though he’s practically mouthing the words, so thin is his voice.

“Yeah, well,” Schlatt says, his voice echoing and distant and staticky. Like a snowfall. “Maybe I want you to prove me wrong.”

Prove him wrong?

(a sunny day, flowers twisted absently in his hands, blue flowers to match the blue sweater, blue sky above, and Schlatt’s voice saying, *people like us don’t change*, and he once believed that, believed that his role was set and there was no going back, and he believed that for Schlatt as well, believed that for the both of them there could be no redemption, but now he isn’t so sure, and he looks into Schlatt’s eyes and he thinks that perhaps)

“Schlatt,” he whispers, and Schlatt gives him a long look. Hard, but not cruel, measured, but not mocking, considering, not dismissive. And perhaps, just perhaps, there is a little bit of regret there, too.

(regret for the boys they once were, full of life and ideas and hope, tongues sharp and minds sharper, and what good friends they used to be, in the days of their youths when they were free and unburdened and war was a tale from the past and politics a distant future and betrayal a joke and a game, when they were young, when they were young)

“Prove me wrong, Wilbur,” Schlatt says, and then, he is gone. He winks out of existence, and there is no shimmer of blue in the air, no feeling of being watched, of eyes on him, and the tether breaks, snaps apart, and he lets out a soundless shout as the backlash hits him, like a rubber band snapping back into place. The energy stops, and there is nothing in its place, and he reaches out, instinctively, searching, and finds nothing. Where the ghost was, there is blank space. Only the world, and no hum of the stars.

(the hum of the stars is in your mind and your mind only and you are alone inside of it and there is no other not anymore)

And he is alive.

“What the fuck,” Tommy is saying. His hands paw at his neck, pressing up to find his pulse, and Wilbur can feel it. The touch is warm. “What the hell did he do to you, that fucker—Wilbur? Wilbur, c’mon, answer me, man, are you still—”

“Here,” he says, and Tommy falls silent. “I’m here.”

He is here. He is lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling, and the vines are still turning to dust above him. He is here, and he hurts, still, deeply and acutely, every inch of him aching, but his heart beats steadily, his lungs expand when he breathes, and there is no catch in his throat, no urge to cough, no churning in his stomach, no convulsions wracking him, and his vision is clear.

“Wilbur?” Tubbo asks. His voice shakes.

“I’m here,” he says again. “I’m not going. I’m still here.”

“Oh my *god*,” Tommy says, and then, Tommy’s all but on top of him, lying on his chest, wrapping his arms around him, knocking the breath right out of him, and Tubbo follows a short second behind, taking up all of the space that Tommy isn’t. He wheezes, but it’s a good sort of wheeze, even if it hurts. It definitely hurts. But he’s hardly about to get them to stop.

They pile on him, grabbing onto him like their lives depend upon it,

(or like his life depends upon it)

and he feels warm, and present, and here. Still here.

(safe)

(*alive*)

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. That’s about all the volume he can manage; his throat feels shredded. “I’m so sorry I scared you.”

“You’d better be sorry,” Tommy chokes out. “I thought you were gonna *die*.”

“I thought I was too,” he says. “But I didn’t want to. I fought it, I swear. I don’t want to go. I mean that.” They’re on top of his arms, pinning them. He gives them a nudge, experimentally, but they don’t give an inch, so he’s going to have to settle for not hugging them, apparently. “I’m staying right here. I don’t want to die.”

The words are novel. He thinks he’d like to say them over and over again, just to test them out, to feel the truth in them. He doesn’t want to die, and more than that, he rather thinks he wants to live. What a revolutionary thing it is, to want to live.

“You dickhead,” Tommy mutters, and buries his face in his shirt, which becomes damp in short order. He won’t call him on it.

“Please don’t do that again, though,” Tubbo says. “That was actively terrifying.”

He manages a laugh. The sound of it surprises him. “I’m not planning on it,” he says.

Despite the heavy weight of two teenage boys resting on him, he feels lighter than he has in weeks. Since he woke up in that forest, rain falling on his face, and turned to the arctic, to the snow and the tundra and the promise of family that he didn’t know how to feel about, the promise of a family that was scattered and broken into too many pieces. Since seeing his brother again a scarce day later, standing in the rain, the notes of the guitar fading in the air. Since the Egg, since the prison, since arguments and tentative reconciliations and everything that’s happened between now and then. And the thoughts still lurk. He can sense them in the shadows of his mind, ready to swell forth again, ready to tell him all about what he deserves and how he will be betrayed and how everyone hates him and he hates himself but for now—

For now, in this moment, he wants to live, and he wants to live well, and he pushes aside the whispers of what he *deserves* and lets himself be, and lets himself love.

(and lets himself be loved)

And then: footsteps. Several pairs, rushing down the corridor. He can't get a good look, and the boys don't seem inclined to take much notice, either. But he has a feeling as to who it is, and his suspicion is confirmed a moment later, as Fundy's voice floats toward him, saying, "—bad, I mean, it's really bad, I really think he's literally dying, and I don't, I just don't—" He sounds as though he's been keeping up this litany for some time, perhaps more as something to say than anything else, something to focus on, something to distract him a bit. His voice gets closer, and then stops. "Oh my god, is he dead?" His voice pitches upward, and overlaps with a sharp inhalation—Phil's, he recognizes.

So there's only one thing to do.

"Help," he rasps, "I'm being crushed."

There is a long moment of silence, and he almost wishes that Tommy and Tubbo would get up so that he could see the looks on their faces. Almost, but not quite. He's content to stay like this for a good while longer.

"Oh my god, he's alive," Fundy says, and there is a sharp exhalation, also from Phil.

"You fucks," Phil says, relief audible. "Do you know how scared I was?"

"I wasn't," Techno says. "I wasn't worried at all."

Finally, Tommy stirs, lifting his face from his chest and glaring off in the direction of the entrance. He also lifts a hand and flips them off.

"Fuck off," he says. "We've just had a traumatic experience, we have. Are you going to stand there and be—and be *twats*, or did you bring anything useful? Like—" He stops, looking back down at him. His face is vaguely tear-stained, though Wilbur's pretty sure that most of it is in his shirt. "Do you still need some pots? Or did—what the hell did he even do, anyway? How did that—you were definitely dying, and then he was there, all, all *like that*, and then he disappeared and you were better. What did he do?"

"Changed, I think," he murmurs, and judging from the expression on Tommy's face, he doesn't get it. But that's alright.

"Okay," Phil says, and then he's sweeping toward them and kneeling. His wings are on full display, he notes, no effort at all put toward hiding them, and maybe it doesn't really mean anything, but he can't help but feel glad. Phil should never have to hide his wings, no matter what condition they're in. "Alright—here, Tubbo, could you move over a bit?"

Tubbo shifts off of him, too, his breathing unsteady. His eyes are slightly red-rimmed to match Tommy's. He doesn't say anything, just shuffles to the side so that he's sitting next to

Tommy. Phil shoots a quick smile at him, one that's probably supposed to be reassuring but comes off as strained, and then, his hands are on Wilbur's shoulders.

"You think you can sit up, Wil?" he asks, and Wilbur tries. He tries, but immediately gives it up as a lost cause as all his core muscles cry out in immediate protest.

"Sitting up ability is currently on strike, I believe," he says, and Phil's brow furrows in concern, but he takes it in stride. Behind him, Fundy and Techno are both hovering—though Fundy's far more obvious about it. It is a bit funny how they're both doing it, though, and the contrast between them, Techno's bulk and general everything next to Fundy's fidgeting. Fundy keeps casting glances at Techno, too, nervous ones.

Phil pulls him into an upright position, and he moans, his head swimming for a second before the lightheadedness abates. He hunches forward, letting gravity pull him back down a little; he thinks he'd flop over like a ragdoll if it weren't for Phil steadying him.

"Where are you hurt the worst?" Phil asks, voice quiet. "Fundy said you were coughing up blood. And that you had a seizure, I'm guessing, judging from what he told us."

He can still taste it on his tongue. Sharp iron. And his limbs are all very sore.

"A bit everywhere," he admits. "I'm pretty sure all my organs were giving out on me at once, so I don't think there's one specific area that needs attention." Phil's expression widens into open dismay at that, and something very much like fear, and perhaps he shouldn't have phrased it quite like that. Perhaps he shouldn't be so blasé about his imminent death in front of the man who he begged to take his third life and definitely emotionally scarred in the process. But he's still a bit wrapped up in the fact that he's alive at all, alive and glad to be so.

"Okay," Phil says, in a way that implies he definitely does not think that it's okay, but he's trying to keep it together. "Okay. That's—okay. Do you think you could get down a regen?"

He pulls a face, but nods. Regen potions have never been his favorite; their magic is rough, unsubtle, far more concerned with function over comfort. But he likely needs one, or two, or several, or as many as his body can keep down, because he is alive, but probably far from alright, still; the continuing ache is evidence enough of that, and he's fairly certain that if he tried to stand, he would tip over immediately. Phil has no reservations, bringing out a pot from his inventory and holding it up to him, a mirror of Tommy's actions a minute before. Only this time, he brings up a shaking hand to help support the glass, even if he can't hold its full weight, and he swallows all of it without coughing.

It gets to work. He winces, and then decides that he's been on the ground long enough. The energy from the pot is more than enough for him to attempt to get up.

"Whoa," Phil says, "wait, Wilbur—"

He's up. His vision blacks out for a second, but when it clears, he's still up, if woozy. He imagines he might need help to walk any significant distance, but he won't need to be carried, at least. Which is nice. Being carried is undignified.

“You should absolutely not be standing up,” Tommy snaps, and he raises an eyebrow.

“And yet,” he says, spreading his arms. Once again, he gets the impression that he’s being far more casual about all of this than he should be. He imagines that it will hit him later, the horror of it, seeing Niki’s face twisted in rage, letting the Egg inside his mind once again, almost being unable to pull himself out, almost dying right after he figured out that he didn’t want to. It will all hit him, he’s sure, but for now, he would like to walk out of here under his own power, his family by his side, everyone alive and unharmed, the trouble dealt with at last. “I’m alright. I actually mean that. I’m not going to keel over.”

He inhales. Wrinkles his nose. Actually, it doesn’t smell very nice in here.

“Is the rest handled?” he asks, glancing at Phil. Phil is standing very close to him, wings flared, likely ready to catch him if he needs it. He won’t, though he appreciates the gesture.

“We felt the Egg go,” Phil says. “It was like—like the world itself distorted for a second, and then patched itself back up. We were already on our way here when Fundy came to get us. In a nutshell, yes, it’s handled. Dream was still up when we left, but the rest of the Egg people just sort of—stopped. And nobody on our side went down hard. Eret and Puffy got the worst of it, but they’ll both be fine, last I saw.”

“But Dream was still up,” he says. Beside him, Tommy’s shoulders hunch.

“Not for long,” Techno says. His gaze is fixed behind them, on the Egg. “We would’ve stayed if we weren’t sure of it.” His eyes drift to Tommy’s for a second. “The others are handlin’ it. But we can go see.” And then, to Tubbo: “The totem came in handy.” A statement, not a question.

“Yes,” Tubbo says, expression inscrutable. “It did. Thank you, Technoblade.”

Techno shrugs. “I gave it to be used,” he says dryly. “Let’s not make a habit of it.” And that is a Techno way of saying *you’re welcome*, of burying the hatchet as much as he is able, and it’s not nearly enough, but it’s a first step. And then, Techno literally steps forward, and Wilbur is a little too concerned with the way that Tubbo stiffens to notice exactly what his intent is, which is why it takes him by surprise when Techno takes his head in his hands and presses their foreheads together.

Just for a second. But it’s an old gesture, a familiar gesture, and not one that he ever expected to receive again. His breath catches.

(you were kids the first time he did this, the first time he butted his head against yours, impossibly gentle, tender in a way you hadn’t realized Techno knew how to be, and it wasn’t until later that Phil explained it to you, explained piglin instincts and the concept of a sounder and how Techno always, always feels far more than he lets on, and always, always cares, perhaps too much, and he still does, despite everything, he still does)

And then, Techno walks forward, past them, to the husk of the Egg that lies behind, and the moment is over. But it was there. It was there, when it didn’t have to be, when Techno would still be well within his rights to hold back from them, from him, to keep his distance. But

here he is, displaying open affection, and he's not naive enough to think that means it's all fixed, but—

Hope is a dangerous thing, but he feels in the mood to indulge. And beside him, Tubbo relaxes, and Tommy, just for a second, wears an expression that suggests a bit of hope of his own.

He turns to watch Techno as he roots through the dust, a crumbling, greyed-out monument that barely holds any shape. A reminder, and nothing more. An empty shell, and that, too, will disintegrate soon enough, leaving a room of dust and lava pools, and statues long abandoned.

Techno huffs. Reaches down. And from the middle of the Egg, he pulls out—

“Is that fucking Skeppy,” Tommy states, flat as a fucking pancake.

He blinks. Because it—is. Somehow. Fucking Skeppy. Though he looks different; parts of him are the same blue, but many patches are discolored, greyish white, and as Techno hoists him up, Wilbur thinks he sees red slipping off of him, like runny paint.

“Oh my god,” Tubbo says. “Was the Egg Skeppy this whole time?”

“I was wonderin’ where this guy got off to,” Techno says, and throws Skeppy across his shoulders in a fireman’s carry, apparently unconcerned. “He hadn’t been by to bother me in a while. And BadBoyHalo kind of just sat down and started cryin’ about him, which, I won’t lie, I had no idea how to handle, not my area, but I thought he might be here. Are we leavin’ these two here, or takin’ them?”

Niki and Jack. Both on the ground, chests rising and falling. Free of the Egg, now, but he’s not sure where that leaves them. Though it would likely be—

“Leave ‘em,” Tommy says, startlingly vehement. “Just, we’ll come back, leave ‘em here for now.”

“I don’t think he meant to,” Tubbo says quietly. “I think it just happened really fast.”

“Don’t care,” Tommy says. “Leave ‘em.”

He looks back and forth between them. Gold still dances across Tubbo’s skin. And he wasn’t turned around, didn’t see what happened, but he thinks he can guess, based on everything, based on Niki’s sword at Tommy’s throat and Jack pinning Tubbo to the ground, based on their desperate, misdirected need for vengeance and the way Jack shouted and a boy who would do just about anything to ensure Tommy’s safety. Hears *I don’t think he meant to*, and thinks about other times, darker times,

(and meaning does not always matter, because intent is washed away in impact, and he never meant to hurt them)

and he decides not to ask. Not now. Not yet. Though it should be addressed. A lot of things should be addressed, a lot of things that they have not, yet, because there has been no time,

because everything has been moving at a breakneck pace, but the pace will be slower now. The pace will be slower, and they will have time.

He looks to Fundy. Fundy stares back, not saying anything at all. His eyes are wet.

“I’m glad you’re not dead,” Fundy murmurs. Quiet enough that he doesn’t think anyone else hears it.

“Me too,” he says. “And I’m glad you’re here.”

A start. A first step. There are so many of those that still need to be taken. For now, Fundy’s lips curl into what might be the ghost of a smile.

They will have time.

The scene they return to is this: some are standing, some are sitting, all gathered in the courtyard of the castle. The gates lie wide open. The vines are gone. The sun is rising.

There is Eret, standing tall, though blood still runs down from a wound on their shoulder and another long gash on their arm. Their crown is blood splattered, their glasses still perched on their nose, though slipping down, and Wilbur glances away before he can take in something he’s not meant to see. There is Puffy, kneeling, her blood on the grass around her; it is her leg that is wounded, though it is difficult to tell how badly. There is Sam, shifting, uncertain, a lost look in his eyes as his fingers flex around his trident. There is Purpled, on the outskirts, on guard but perhaps an ally, though he has no reason to be. There is BadBoyHalo, sitting, curled into himself, tears running down his face, which is less ashen. The other members of the Eggpire cluster around him, seemingly in various states of shock. None of them move. They are mostly ignored.

There is Ranboo, also sitting. His eyes are wide. Tears are streaming down his face, too, and a bit of steam rises from his skin. He pays no mind. He’s trembling, occasionally gasping for breath through a sob.

There is Quackity, still standing, hands clutched around an axe like it’s the best protection he knows how to have. He wonders if there’s any truth to that; Quackity has never been one for fighting, though he tries.

(he wonders if Schlatt wanted to say anything to him, too. wonders if it would have done more harm than good)

And then there is Dream, lying on the ground. There is George, crouched by his side. There is Sapnap, kneeling, all his weight on the sword piercing Dream’s chest. Dream’s chest rises and falls, shallow and slow, and nobody moves. Sapnap’s face is flushed, tears in his eyes, and whether they are from anger or grief, he can’t tell.

Dark smoke puffs out from under Dream's mask and dissipates in the air. Tommy makes a small sound, and Wilbur fits his hand into his. Tommy doesn't look at him, doesn't look away from the sight in front of them, but his fingers curl around his.

Sapnap moves as if to draw the sword out. Dream's hand comes up and wraps around the hilt, stopping him.

"No," Dream says, voice a reedy whisper, free of shadow. "You need to be sure it's gone."

And so they stay. The only sound is crying, and Sapnap's harsh breaths, hitched and desperate. Both angry and grieving at once. George's hands inch forward until they're curled into Dream's hoodie. It's like a painting, the three of them. The sun crests the walls of the castle, and the rays fall on them like a caress, and the smoke stops appearing. The sigils carved into the sword dim.

Dream stops breathing. Quietly, and without fanfare. Like a sigh.

As one, more than a dozen communicators chime.

Tommy exhales shakily.

(is this closure? is this what he wanted? he doesn't know, but there is no going back, no going back to the old days, when they were all still friends and the war was a game)

(and after everything that Dream did perhaps it feels wrong that this should end so abruptly or that he should not shove the sword in his chest himself for what he did to Tommy or that Tommy should have no say in his fate but at the same time perhaps it is right and perhaps this is the way the circle breaks at last)

Techno sighs, walks over to where Bad sits, and dumps Skeppy in front of him. As if a spell has been broken, Tubbo moves, too, crossing to Ranboo and crouching before him, speaking to him in low tones. Several others start moving, like the world was on pause and has only just resumed. Sapnap draws the sword from Dream's chest, but he remains there, kneeling by the body.

Dream looks peaceful. Though with his mask still on, it's impossible to tell. No one motions to remove it.

Tommy presses close to him. On the other side, Fundy steps closer. Against his back, he feels one of Phil's wings brush against all of them, a promise of shelter, of safety. Perhaps this time, it will be kept.

Just like that, it is over. Can it be over?

(is it ever truly over?)

(but in every ending there is a beginning, and the world still spins, and the grass still grows, and the sky is still blue, and finally there is more reason to look forward than back)

The sun rises. Is rising, has risen, will rise again and again and again. And he's lived to see it.

Chapter End Notes

I know y'all read that character death warning and got scared. I'm so sorry, hopefully this is better than what you feared!

Just two chapters left, now. It's kind of hard to believe. But some of you may have noticed that this fic now exists as part of a series. That is not an accident. There's going to be more to tell in this au after this fic is over, and I'm very much looking forward to it! It's actually been a long time in coming; I always knew that I could never fit Wilbur's whole healing arc in a fic that takes place within the span of a few weeks, and I also knew that there were other characters and arcs that I wanted to develop more in a way that wasn't really possible in a fic that takes place entirely from Wilbur's pov. So, while there won't be any more fics that are of this sheer size, there's going to be plenty more in this 'verse, both for c!Wilbur and for everyone else, so feel free to subscribe to the series if you'd like to see what comes after!

[My tumblr!](#)

Next up, Chapter Twenty-Two: In which closure is a difficult thing to find and peace practically a foreign concept, but perhaps they can finally start working toward them both.

marching on

Chapter Notes

You guys have wowed me again; thank you so much for your response to the last chapter. I know I say this literally all the time, but like, damn. It really does mean so much.

Also!! Thought y'all should know!! We've got fanart!! A while back (and I just, totally forgot to link it here oops), [@hotmothsummer](#) on tumblr drew [the scene from chapter 14 where everybody met DreamXD for the first time](#), and you should all look at it because this DreamXD design is just. So fucking cool holy shit. And then last week, [@piip-er](#) on tumblr (and I think also on twitter? but I don't have bird app lmao) did some [absolutely amazing art of Wilbur and the Egg](#), and holy shit you guys, it's so cool, please check it out.

Chapter warnings for swearing, mentioned blood, memory issues, past character death, and referenced past suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil all but manhandles him into bed.

He protests, but it's lip service, really. He's pushed himself far past the point of good health, even if he's no longer on death's door. His weariness pulls at him, and a persistent ache still permeates through to his bones. Moving hurts, and if he tries to stand for too much longer, he'll collapse.

So he lets Phil guide him back into the castle. It's not his preferred place of rest, especially not now that there's no need to gather here, no need for fortifications to keep them safe, no need for walls and gates to hold armies at bay, but he allows it. He imagines no one else will be going very far, either; Tommy, at least, is sticking close, shows no sign of wanting to return to his own home.

He doesn't really want to sleep. There's so much to do. They need to be sure that the Egg's minions truly are free of its influence, need to treat the wounds of the injured, need to—do something with Dream's body.

It's odd that he's dead. He held the power of a god, once, and now, there is nothing there at all. No life. No spark in eyes that no one ever got to see. The old levity will never return to his voice. There will be no chance for further punishment, and there will be no hope of redemption. The rest of those touched by demons will get a future. Dream won't, and he doesn't know how he feels about that.

(because on one hand, Dream did so much harm, and he nearly killed him that day in the prison and he'd do it again, for what he did to everyone but especially for what he did to Tommy, for stealing the light from his eyes, for taunting him hurting him abusing him, and for Tommy's sake, at least, this must be an acceptable outcome, because at least now Dream has no more power over him, will never be able to harm him again, and that is what matters the most)

(but on the other, Dream was corrupted, well and truly, overwhelmed by a dark force, and perhaps Dream gave into it but so did he, too, though the forces were different and their battles on different grounds, and here he is, alive and well when Dream is not, and he will be able to right his mistakes when Dream will never have the opportunity, and they cannot know how differently things would have gone had Dream been fully himself but he feels confident in assuming that it would have been different, and that makes it difficult, assigning blame, and it means that perhaps Dream would have tried to make it right, if he was able, if he got the chance, and now they will never know)

But then, he doesn't know how he feels about much of anything at the moment. The rush of adrenaline that accompanied his near death, his brush with the void, has worn off, and the energy that Schlatt

(he's trying not to think about Schlatt because if he thinks about Schlatt he'll have to admit that he misses him already despite everything despite how he hurt him and how they hurt each other despite the way their relationship soured they were younger and fooling around on modded servers built for just the two of them once and now he can't stop remembering the look on his face as he flickered out of existence and the connection between them broke and now he is gone and he misses him even though perhaps he shouldn't but he does he does)

passed to him have both dissipated, leaving him swaying, the world swimming in and out of focus, and even the tableau in front of the castle is not enough to keep his attention, the risk of more harm not enough to maintain his focus. He should help, but Phil takes one look at him and starts ushering him inside, and that's all there is to it, really. Phil takes him back to the room he's borrowing, sits him down on his bed with a stern look, and he doesn't have the strength to fight it.

(and something in him recognizes that this is wisdom, and maybe for once he will listen, will stop willfully throwing himself over the line that marks his limits)

"You have to come get me," he says, forcing words out with a tongue weighted by lead, "if anything happens, if you need me, come and get me. I'll be up in just a few hours."

Even as he speaks, Phil is gently pushing him to lie down, and then smoothing some of his hair back from his forehead, like he's twelve years old again and sick with the flu. He'd lean into the contact if he had the energy for it.

"Sure you will," Phil says. Already, it's hard to understand him. It's like he's falling, falling once more, only this time, he knows that sleep awaits him. Sleep, and then, in just a little while, waking. So it's more like floating than falling, and he likes the sound of that better. Floating to sleep. "Just get some rest, and we'll see how you feel when you get up, okay?" He pauses, and then says, "I'm really proud of you, son. You've done so well."

There is something in his voice that is gentle, and aching, and sad, a thousand regrets flickering in the air, bobbing like will o' the wisps. There is something in his voice that is laden with years, more than Wilbur has or ever will see, and he is reminded that his father is old. Ancient. Weary. He has never understood it before, that weariness, not really.

(because no child wants to believe that their parent is tired, that their parent is fallible, that their parent has grieved and will continue to do so, because children wish to believe their parents are monuments, forever standing and unweathered by the sands of time, but there comes a moment when all discover that their parents are human instead, and Phil is human, and Phil is tired, and Phil has spent months grieving a son who no longer wished to live, and Phil is proud of him but he think that Phil grieves for him as well, grieves for him even though he is here again, and he thinks he understands why)

He ought to reassure him in some way. He wants to. Wants to make sure Phil knows everything really is alright.

“You don’t need to be sad,” he murmurs, and lets his eyes slip closed. “I want to stay. I figured it out. I’m going to stay alive, Phil.”

If Phil makes a response, he doesn’t hear it, because sleep comes quickly, and without dreams.

When he wakes up, it’s darker in his room than he anticipated. He only wanted to rest for a few hours; there’s still so much to do, so much that needs to happen before all his responsibilities are taken care of.

(though maybe he will let some things slide onto other people’s shoulders, and maybe he can finally allow others to carry some of the burden, and maybe the world does not have to be held up by him and him alone, and maybe he can rest, and maybe he can allow himself some measure of peace, in a world where there is no need for generals or presidents or rebellions or rooms full of buttons and where he is worthy of living by nature of being himself)

But a glance out the window tells him that it’s evening; the sun still hangs above the horizon, but it won’t for much longer. He’s slept through the day, then, and he is quick in tearing off the bedsheets and sitting up. He braces himself against the wooziness, but it only lasts a moment, and then he deems it safe enough to stand.

His legs tremble, and movement forces him to process that he still hurts. Rather a lot, actually, a pervasive soreness, and a tightness in his chest, a slight difficulty breathing that wasn’t present before this morning. But he can stand, and after taking a few experimental steps, he determines that he can also walk. And he’s had some amount of rest, which is far better than none, and there is nobody in his room, and he would rather like to lay eyes on everyone, to know that they’re alright.

So, he makes for the door, and then, suddenly, he is not alone after all.

The air shifts. Almost imperceptibly, but old war instincts make it impossible to ignore, and he whirls around. Moving so quickly is a mistake, and he places a hand against the doorframe to brace himself, the other hand already reaching into his inventory, prepared to draw a weapon. He still has his crossbow. Where the sword got off to, he doesn't know. He dropped it, he thinks, in the Egg's chamber, so whether it's still there or someone picked it up, he's not sure.

But he whirls around, and the other person in the room is Karl Jacobs, brown hair mussed, hoodie wrinkled, and eyes bleary.

He stops in place.

"Uh," Karl says. "Hi. Where am I?"

He has to swallow several times before his throat will let him form words. He is very aware of this man in a way that he never has been before.

(aware of this man entreating a god and entreating the universe and he saw him saw him when the universe was laid out before him and Karl is a man out of time and yet with too much to spare caught inbetween forces that tug at him pull at him rip him from hearth and home and send him far and away)

Is he a threat? Perhaps. He'll reserve his judgment.

"Eret's castle," he says. "In the Greater Dream SMP."

"Oh," Karl says. "Eret's castle." He frowns, and repeats the words again. "Eret's castle." The second time, he sounds more sure, as if he had to struggle to place the location. "Right, okay. So I'm in—uh, never mind." Karl squints at him. "And I—I know you, don't I? Have we met before?"

He swallows again.

(you are alive because of this man you live and breathe because this man asked the universe and the universe said)

(he is alive because of this man, and yet there is no recognition in his eyes)

"We have," he says, voice rough. "We don't know each other well, but we've met, yes. My name is Wilbur Soot."

"Wilbur Soot," Karl repeats, musingly.

This feels—painful, somehow. He has little personal investment in Karl. And yet, to see him like this—

(he is a man out of time and yet with too much to spare and mortals are not built to be torn into so many pieces and spread across so many years and each time he travels he leaves a part

of himself behind and)

(you know a thing or two about tearing yourself apart so perhaps this hurts because you look at him and see something of yourself)

“The Egg is gone,” he says quietly. “I killed it this morning.”

“What Egg?” Karl asks, but then, his eyes widen, and he takes a step forward. “Wait. The Egg. The *Egg*. Oh Prime, that’s what—you did it? You really did it? So I did the right thing? It’s gone?”

“You did,” he says. “For better or for worse, but I think it will be for the better, now. Do you remember? What you did?”

“Kind of,” Karl says. “It’s coming back. Uh, yeah, wow, actually, you’re looking pretty good for a dead guy. Wilbur Soot.”

He resists the urge to sigh. And then gives up, and sighs anyway. “So I’ve been told,” he says. “I suppose I ought to be thanking you. For getting a god to pluck me out of the void.”

“Oh,” Karl says. “You’re welcome. I didn’t do all that much. I don’t think. Is everyone okay?”

“As far as I know,” he says. “I was going to go find some of the others, if you’d like to come along with. Sapnap and Quackity might still be here.”

“Sapnap and Quackity,” Karl says, and then frowns, just like he did before. “They sound familiar. I know them, right?”

(even when he was a ghost he still knew his family still loved them dearly even if he could only remember the sweet and not the bitter and so at least his brothers his father his son his friends did not have to look at him and know that he did not know them because he did he always knew them if nothing else he knew them)

“You know them,” he agrees, and the rest curls up and dies in his throat. “Come on, then.”

He turns the door knob, pushes it open, and closes it once Karl follows behind him. A few more steps, and he feels confident enough to walk without tracing a hand along the wall for support. He’s sure he looks a mess; he hasn’t washed, so a glance down at himself tells him that his shirt is covered in splotches of dried blood. His own, he’s sure. It might not come out by now, but that’s alright; he has no particular attachment to the garment. The coat is a different story, but perhaps it is time to shuck it off. It belongs to a period of his life he has no desire to return to. Perhaps he clings to it too fervently. Something about symbolism.

A consideration for a bit later, maybe. For now, mess or not, he goes about finding where everyone’s holed up. Karl trails along after him, fiddling with the sleeves of his hoodie, expression perpetually set in vague confusion.

There are several people in the throne room. Mostly sleeping, slumped against each other. A lot of the former Egg people are in here; Bad, for one, is slumped over a still unconscious

Skeppy, gripping him like he thinks he'll turn into smoke if he doesn't. The woman he doesn't know is slumped against Antfrost's shoulder. Punz is awake, sitting against the wall, though he seems to be staring at nothing. Ponk is a short distance away, and Sam of all people is curled into him, hiding his face against him, and Ponk is returning the embrace, even in what appears to be an uneasy slumber.

There are a few people awake, though. Eret is here, and Puffy, both in a quiet discussion with someone new, someone that Wilbur has never seen before, with golden skin and wearing what appears to be a—shark onesie? They are whispering, too far to hear what's being said. There's no sign of anyone else.

Eret sees him, then, and her lips part into an 'o'. She makes as if to get up and come over to him, but he shakes his head, raising a hand, and she stops. Both Puffy and the other are staring at him, now, but he pays them no mind. Instead, he steps slightly to the side and gestures to where Karl is standing and shifting from foot to foot.

Eret nods, understanding on her face. She points to the right, and then holds up three fingers. Three doors down. He nods, flashes an 'ok' hand symbol, and leaves them to their discussion.

Three doors down to the right, the door is open. He stops before entering. Sapnap is there, and Quackity, standing facing each other, both slightly red-faced. Like they've just finished an argument. But George is there, too, sitting by the wall, silent, and next to him—

It is odd, how still Dream is. Unnatural. Not right. Dream should be all motion, quick and non-stop, impatient, reckless energy. But Dream is not that any longer, because Dream is dead. George sits next to his body. One of his hands is resting very close to Dream's as if he wants to take it, but can't quite bring himself to.

Karl makes a quiet noise.

"Dream's dead?" he asks. It's a whisper, but both Sapnap and Quackity's heads snap toward him. George's doesn't. He's not even sure that George is awake. His goggles are on, hiding his eyes.

"Oh my god," Quackity says, "*Karl*."

Karl steps forward, hesitantly at first, but as Wilbur watches, his face settles into first recognition, and then relief. His steps become more sure, and both his fiances reach out for them, and then they're hugging, the three of them.

"Hey," Karl says. "Sorry it took me a while to get here. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Who was scared?" Sapnap asks, though his voice trembles, fragile in a way that Wilbur has never heard from him. "Just, jeez, Karl, maybe warn us the next time you go missing right when there's a demonic Egg trying to take over the whole server."

"Will do," Karl says, and Wilbur turns away. This is not for him, and the air tastes far too bittersweet for his liking. Because he knows already, knows that Karl will not tell them, that

Karl cannot. That Karl is caught up in something beyond his control. That he's losing himself by the hour, and has no way of pulling himself back up, no way of preventing the forces of the cosmos from pulling him where they will.

And there is this, too: feet away from the happy reunion, George crouches over a corpse. Even if he does not know whether he believes Dream deserved death, even if he has never cared for George at all, there is something tragic about it.

(something about old friends that change and bonds that break and sometimes there is no second chance at all and sometimes the ending is cruel)

He walks away. Their voices fade. He thinks he wants to go find his family now.

He goes to the roof instead.

The bench from last night is still there, and he sits on it. Alone, this time; there is no sign of Phil. He looks out over the lands of the SMP, still visible in the sinking sunlight, and thinks about the bigness of the world. From here, he can see the main nether portal, and the community house not too far, and the Prime Path stretching on toward other destinations. Somewhere in the distance, there is a home built into the side of a hill, small and humble and smelling of dirt but well-loved, well lived-in. Somewhere in the distance, there is a prison that held someone who was both monster and man, and who will now never get the opportunity to choose to be the latter. Somewhere in the distance, there are ruins covered in glass, and a grid in the sky, a testament to hubris, perhaps, but also to hopes. A grave left untouched for the fair land that was.

There are still some vines. Greying, crumbling, but not gone yet. There is still clean up to be done.

Electricity crackles on the back of his neck. On his next inhalation, his lungs fill with ozone.

"Good job," he says. "You've stopped relying on having a table. I'm very proud."

He turns his head, then. The god is standing next to him. Standing, not floating, though Wilbur still can't see on what, still can't see whether they have feet or not under their long cloak. Their halos spin, dancing around each other in lazy circles, and the power that rolls off of them is palpable. They have brought the universe with them; the humming is louder, and once again, he is tempted to harmonize, to let his own voice join with the song, the joy and the jubilation, the love.

Their hood is turned away from him. He cannot see under it.

"We did it," he says. "I don't know if you noticed, but the Egg is gone. I stabbed it. It almost stabbed me back, metaphorically speaking. But it's gone."

The god says nothing.

"Schlatt sacrificed himself for me," he says. Saying it makes it more real, though the phrase is not one he ever thought he'd say. Melancholy strikes a pang in his heart. "I won't ask

anything more of you, but if you'd like to do something about that, feel free." He stops, gathering his thoughts. "I think he changed, you see. And I think that means something, that people like us can change. That we do. That we have."

The god extends a hand toward him. It's sudden, and he jolts. But the hand is holding something, offering him something, and he accepts it, gingerly. It's a book, the cover weathered, crafted of brown leather. The pages are aged, yellowing, crackling as he turns to the first one and squints at the unfamiliar script.

"Do you want to hear a story?" the god asks, and he jolts for a different reason. He looks up from the book, and still can't see under the hood.

"That depends on how it ends," he answers. "I'm not one for sad stories at the moment."

The god's shoulders lift. "I think it depends on how you look at it. It's still going on, too," the god says. "It's about a god who tried to make a home, and then made a lot of mistakes."

"Don't bother, then," he says. "I know how it goes already."

The god falls quiet.

"I've made a lot of mistakes," the god says. "And the worst thing is, I don't know if it was me making them or not. The biggest ones, I mean. I think—maybe I'm not a good person. I don't think a good person would've reacted the way I did, to your country. I think I get that now. And maybe a good person wouldn't have given into the shadows like I did. But I'd like to think that I wouldn't have done what came after, if I'd still been, uh. Completely myself. I guess I can't know."

"I think that the worst thing is actually the people that you hurt," he says. "Don't make it about you. Not that part."

The god's head tilts.

"You have a point," the god says, and he snorts.

"Do George and Sapnap know you're alive, Dream?" he asks, and Dream finally turns toward him fully. There is no universe under the god's hood, not as there was before. Instead, there is a mask. Circular, white, and perhaps most importantly, blank. No smiling face stares out at him. But he knows he is not wrong. Knew from the moment that the god spoke.

"I don't know if I'm alive myself," Dream says. "I'm not the same. The corruption died before the rest of me did, and then the part that was the power reached out, and—" A hand slides out from under his cloak. It's gloved, but remarkably human-looking. If Wilbur didn't know what to look for, hadn't had the universe reach into him and open his eyes, he might mistake Dream for human, might skate his gaze past the halos and the constant buzz and the lightning in the air. Might ignore it all for the sake of his own sanity. But the universe will never leave him, and he will never be able to close his eyes again, he thinks. Not to this.

“We’re together again,” Dream says. “But I think I lost part of myself. I don’t know if I’m Dream. Not really.”

Wilbur sighs. It’s just complications on top of more complications at this point, isn’t it? And he wishes he could assign Dream a label. Wishes he could call him a villain outright, firmly on the dark side of black-and-white. But here Dream is, or what is left of Dream, at least, and he’s agreed with most of what he’s said so far.

He thinks that Dream probably isn’t a good person. Hasn’t been since the war, since the beginning of his need to keep iron clad control over the rest of the server. Those, at least, were choices that he made himself, free of demonic influence. And afterward—giving him the TNT, agreeing that he’d blow it up no matter what, taking the choice from his hands, and then, what he did to Tommy,

(to everyone of course and to Tubbo too but his mind always comes back to Tommy)

the corruption was there, then, and it played a part to be sure, but it was also Dream. It wasn’t as if there was something puppeting him, pulling his strings. It was Dream, just twisted, and he must take the blame.

But how much of it? And where does he go from here? Where do they all go?

He’s too tired for this. He hasn’t finished figuring himself out yet, his own wants and desires versus what he has earned and what would be fair to everyone else. He still has so many mistakes of his own that he needs to fix, or at least attempt to. He can’t save Dream. Can’t redeem him.

Dream’s going to need to make that decision himself.

“What are you going to do now, then?” he asks.

Dream sighs, and—takes off the mask. Holds it lightly in his hand. His face is—a face, to be sure. Normal looking. His eyes are a striking shade of green, but that is the only attention-grabbing aspect. For the first time, Wilbur can read his expressions, and finds them open, bare, undiluted. There is anger and pain and confusion and regret and a dozen others. Something like sympathy stirs within him, but not too much. He doesn’t have space for too much, because whether Dream was corrupted or not, half-possessed or not, Tommy comes first in his reckoning.

“I don’t know,” Dream says. “I think I need to leave. Find somewhere else to be. I’m not going back to the prison.” At that, his gaze sharpens, and Wilbur doesn’t know how to respond. Would Dream deserve to go back? After everything? Maybe. But he doesn’t think he has the right to make that determination, and here he is, back thinking about deserving again, if a different kind. “But I think it would be best for everyone if I left them alone. At least for a while. I think—I need to figure myself out. Without demons or anything else.”

That, at least, is something he can relate to. He inclines his head.

“That seems fair enough,” he says. “But I’d like to make something very clear to you. If I ever catch you so much as breathing wrong in Tommy’s general vicinity, I will destroy all that you are. I don’t care if you’re a god. I’m no believer, and frankly, I don’t give a shit how much of it was actually you. You hurt him, you manipulated him, and you abused him, and if he ever speaks to you again, it will be on his terms, not yours.”

Dream breathes out.

“Yeah,” he says. “I think that’s fair.”

And that is hopeful, that Dream recognizes his wrongdoing, when before, he would have shrugged it off, would have denied it entirely or pretended that it was for Tommy’s own good, when really, it was only to make Dream feel powerful, to make him feel in control. When really, it was only because Dream felt threatened by a child.

“You did a lot of terrible things,” he says. “I’m half tempted to try to kill you right now, even still.”

“But you won’t?” Dream asks.

“I won’t,” he agrees, and considers that for a moment. The man he was when he first stepped foot on this server would never have thought of it as an option at all. The man he later became would have invoked violence without hesitation. Now, he is somewhere between. “The option’s always on the table. I don’t like you. I doubt I ever will. We were friends, once, but I don’t want to be again.”

There, in Dream’s eyes, an unmistakable flash of annoyance. Good. Let him be annoyed.

“But it’d be hypocritical of me if I, of all people, said you don’t get the chance to relearn yourself.” He pauses. “But Dream, you have to try. You have to try to make things right. Not because you’re seeking forgiveness, or want to make yourself look better, but because you genuinely want to change. Because you genuinely want to fix things.”

Dream glances away. A flush has risen on his cheeks. Looking at him like this, it is easier to see him as human. Easier to ignore the twin halos circling, circling.

“I’m—working on that,” Dream says, and he didn’t really expect anything better. But perhaps it’s a start.

“Then good luck to you,” he says. “I’ve meant every word I’ve said to you. Go after Tommy, or anyone else for that matter, and I won’t be the only one aiming for your throat. But I mean that, too. Good luck.”

“Thank you,” Dream says, and then makes a gesture. This time, now that he’s looking for it, he can see that there is an arm connected to the hand. “That’s the revive book, by the way.”

“I gathered.”

“I thought—I mean, it’s a three-life server. I can’t change that. The rules are set. And I didn’t know if you’d want to leave, head somewhere with infinite respawns. But if you stick around,

I thought that might come in handy.” Dream frowns. “Technically, it’s hacks, so it shouldn’t even exist, but—I guess it’s the least I could do.”

“It is,” he agrees, running his hand over the leather. It’s a welcome layer of security. “But it’s appreciated.”

Dream nods, sharply, satisfaction flickering in his eyes. He’s so easy to read. He’s not practiced in hiding his expressions; the mask does that for him.

“Bye, Wilbur,” he says, short and casual, and part of him wants to rebuff him. A great part of him, actually. But he just nods.

“Goodbye, Dream,” he says. “Come back ready to make amends. Don’t run from this.”

Dream’s lips tilt upward into a smirk, slight but not harsh. “It’d be like old times if I did,” he murmurs, as if to himself. And then, he’s gone. The electricity slowly fades away, and the universe is relegated to the back of his mind once again, always present but part of the background, able to be overlooked. The revive book remains solid in his hands, a comforting weight. He should probably give it to Phil; he’ll know what to do with it better than anyone else.

He sighs, and looks out at the world again. There’s still enough light to see by. And there’s somewhere he’d like to go before the sun sets.

When he returns to the hallway that leads to both his and Tommy’s rooms, he finds Techno and Phil settled against the wall, leaning against each other. Both weary, eyes obviously drooping. One of Phil’s wings is wrapped around Techno, and on a second glance, he might actually be asleep. Wilbur stops a moment before approaching; they weren’t there when he and Karl exited, but by their positions, they’ve been there a while. It’s very possible that he happened to leave the one moment when they got up to do something else.

At least he knows that Tommy’s in his room. Their location right between the two doors screams of watchful protectiveness.

He strides toward them, and Techno looks over, blinking blearily. And then, his eyes widen, and flicker to the door of his room, which stands closed. Suspicion confirmed, then, and he can’t help but grin. He wasn’t trying to sneak past anyone, of course, but it’s always fun to get one over Techno.

“What are you doin’?” Techno demands, as soon as he’s close enough, but his voice is a harsh whisper. Phil really is asleep, slumped against Techno’s shoulder. He looks younger, no longer so careworn, some of the lines on his face smoothed away.

“Walking,” he whispers back, “which I assure you, I am more than capable of. I just slept for—what, ten hours or so? You could call me rejuvenated. A new man, even.”

“That’s a load of crap,” Techno says. “Go back to bed.”

“I will,” he says. “In a bit. There’s something I want to do, first.” He looks toward the other door. Tommy’s door. There are voices coming from within. The words are indistinguishable, but the voices distinct; Tommy is in there, and Tubbo, as well as Fundy, and he believes Ranboo. And—that’s right, Ranboo. He wants to know what was going on with Ranboo. Obviously, if he’d truly betrayed them, he wouldn’t be in a room with the rest of them as if nothing had happened. Techno, for one, would never have allowed it; he takes betrayal quite seriously.

But in any case, he won’t interrupt their discussion. There will be time, later.

“Tell them I’ve gone out for a bit, if they ask?” he says. “I won’t be long. Also, take care of this, would you?”

He hands Techno the book. Techno blinks at it, and then at him.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he says flatly.

“I won’t,” he says. “I just want to visit somewhere. They probably won’t even notice I’m gone.”

He can see the struggle on Techno’s face; some part of him clearly wants to come with him, to keep him out of trouble. Wilbur can’t even blame him for it, even if it does rankle, just a bit. But Techno’s got Phil asleep on him, and a room of people he pretty clearly wants to stand guard over, and hopefully, he trusts Wilbur enough to let him out of his sight for a little while.

“I wouldn’t bet on that,” Techno says, “but alright. Comms are up again, so expect to be spammed if you don’t get back soon.”

He lifts his shoulder, half a shrug. “Fair enough,” he says, and Techno sighs, relaxing back against the wall, watching him with red, half-lidded eyes.

It is not raining when he steps outside. Not raining, and hardly a cloud in the sky. It’s blue, still, but fading into a darker shade, and toward the horizon, there are hints of orange and pink, the sun throwing out her last rays. He sets off down the Prime Path, booted feet clunking on the wood, and he sticks his hands in his pockets.

The server is quiet. In the distance, he thinks he hears birdsong, heralding the night. He walks, and he feels like he’s the only person here, like he’s all on his own, wandering, lost, only—not. Only, he knows exactly where everyone is, knows that he can go back to them at any time, knows that he will.

(knows they will welcome him, that they want him, and he doesn’t quite understand why, still, but they will always want him, no matter what he’s capable of, even if that turns out to

be nothing at all, and he doesn't understand it and perhaps he never will but perhaps just the knowing is enough for now)

He stops by Tommy's house on the way. It stands still and quiet. There are no vines and no dust; his lands remained untouched. Perhaps the Egg was afraid of him, afraid of the young man who did not hear its voice. It is strange, he thinks, how much power Tommy seems to hold over people, how much sway, how much influence. What is it about him that makes people like Dream and things like the Egg look at him and decide that he is the worst possible threat?

(this is something that ought to be rectified, because Tommy is a boy still, and boys should not have to be heroes, and he started it so perhaps he can be the one to end it, now that he knows he is staying)

He pops in and out. This isn't his destination. He grabs the guitar from where it still leans against the wall, slings it across his back, and keeps on his way.

The ruins of L'Manberg are unchanged, save for the lack of the crimson. He seats himself on one of the clumsy platforms that overlooks the glass, and pulls his guitar into his lap. He doesn't play, not yet.

He's not sure why he's here.

L'Manberg was—well. It was. It was, and that's a sure thing, but he's spent so long thinking that it was bad from the beginning. That he built it on flawed foundations, that he himself was flawed, that it was always going to fall and so it did, and so it was corrupted, and so it needed to be destroyed. Because it fell to grief and darkness, and it could never again be the shining pinnacle that he hoped it would be, once upon a time. And if he could not have that light, then no one could. But that wasn't from malice—none of it was malice. There was relief, and there was fear, and there was hopelessness and despair and a glee that stemmed from both of those, and perhaps there was a bit of fanaticism, really. But there was no malice.

He thought he was doing them all a favor, taking it out. He thought there was nothing to be saved. And he thought that it would be only right to take himself out with it. Thought that they would all be glad to see him go.

That last, at least, he knows to be false. His family has proved as much ever since the moment of his return. But then there is the other question, the question of what he *deserves*, and he thought—he has always thought that he deserved to die. And more than that, he deserved to die in the way he originally intended, the world aflame and his heart ricocheting in terror as the explosions went off once again. For the last time.

And he was relieved, when the button was finally pressed. Relieved that, one way or another, it had finally been taken out of his hands.

But what he deserves is different from what he wants. He's figured that much out. And with that, comes the consideration of whether what he thinks he deserves is what is right at all.

He tries to piece it all together. Everything that Tommy, that Techno, that Phil has told him. Everything that the Egg offered him, and what he finally managed to reject. And the Egg, he now knows, drew from him, drew from his thoughts, so of course it offered him his perceived deserving rather than his true desire. So now it is a matter of whether he's right, right about what he deserves.

He plucks a guitar string, and winces. It's out of tune again. He sets himself to righting that, the motions coming easily, automatically. Turning the pegs, listening to the note. He learned how to do this by ear a long time ago. And as he does it, he looks back over L'Manberg. The glass, the rubble, the partial structures that yet stand, the grid that hangs over it all. In the distance, a memorial of lapis, in a familiar spot. He doesn't want to go see it, he thinks.

(doesn't need to, because Ghostbur remembers what it looked like, so he does too, because he and Ghostbur, in the end, are perhaps not so different as he has believed, and that, too, is something to be confronted)

He sighs. And he wonders, did L'manberg deserve this?

His memory is tainted, he thinks, by all of what came after. The pain. Losing everything, even himself. And even before that—he wasn't happy. Not truly. The stresses of his position took their toll quickly, as he realized that he didn't know what he was doing, that he was adrift without a lifeboat, and he could never bring himself to ask for help, so certain was he that it would lead people to think lesser of him.

But there were good times. Near the beginning especially. And even when he wasn't so happy, his friends were, and that was more than enough for him.

Did L'Manberg deserve this fate? And if L'Manberg did not, did he?

He plucks the strings again, now that they ring with the proper notes, and finds himself strumming a familiar tune. It hangs in the air like grief and remembrance.

He stops himself.

"You were good once," he says, to a city that cannot hear him. "I think that you were good once. You were good, when we started you. Maybe you could have been again. It's too late for that now."

He strums another note. Pauses.

"I don't regret it, what I did," he says. "That, I've thought about a lot. I don't regret the action. It's selfish, perhaps, but I wouldn't have been able to bear it, continuing on as I was. As we were. But I am sorry for hurting people. I've decided that much."

The guitar twangs. Quietly. Almost sweet, as his fingers run along the strings.

"So I'm not sorry that you're gone," he says. "And yet I am at the same time. Sorry for the possibilities, maybe. The future that could have been, but wasn't. Perhaps it's not right to mourn something that could have been."

He thinks about it. Thinks about walls, and smiling faces, and a picture taken in the summer heat. Thinks about a van, and a would-be drug empire, and the sound of laughter as night fell. Thinks about a bakery, built and maintained by love, and friendship, and bonds that he thought would never break.

“But I’m mourning what was, too,” he says. “Finally. I never let myself, before. But I can, now. I think that’s good.” A strum. An arpeggio. A melody. A symphony. “Maybe you deserved better. Maybe I did, too.”

He pauses again, and naught but the wind answers. It brushes gently through his hair, in his coat.

“Do you know,” he says slowly, “I think I might deserve to live.”

He looks to the stars. The stars, only just emerging, in a sky not yet completely dark, look back.

“And for myself, too,” he says. “Not just for others. I’ve never known how to do that. But I think I might be ready to try.”

His fingers twist in a familiar pattern. He lets them, and for a few minutes, just plays, the same chords, the same fingerings, over and over, until he is used to them again. He wanted to play this, the last time he was here, wanted to play but stopped himself, and he didn’t have his guitar with him, when he stood over his city’s remains, saw them for the first time as a living man. And then, on the bench, as the rain fell, he didn’t let himself sing.

He wasn’t ready.

He thinks he is ready now. Around him, the universe slots into place, and he can hear it humming. Humming with him.

He lets his voice fly. It has been so long, and his vocal cords rasp. The notes are rough, uncertain, and the timbre slightly grating. But at the same time, it is low, it is familiar, and it is his. It is his voice, and he lets himself sing. The old words, the old tune. And this will be the final time, he thinks. This is his farewell. This is the symphony ending. This is the finish. This is closure at long last.

(and he edits the lyrics, just once, because it is time to look forward and that means letting go of old grudges, if he can, if he is capable, and letting the wounds scar rather than fester, and Eret has proved their regret and their growth, so he lets them take their place in the song with the others, and it feels right)

And the song ends, as all songs do, and his voice falls quiet, and he feels better for having played it. He stands, and as he does, he catches sight of movement across the ruins, on the opposite side. Someone else standing. Night has fallen, and he cannot make out their face, but their hair is long, and around their shoulders, the shape of a familiar hood rests.

He waits, heart in his throat, to see if Niki will say anything. Will come to him. But she turns on her heel and vanishes into the shadows, and that is an answer in itself.

But there will be time. Time enough for both of them. There will be time.

He slings his guitar over his shoulder, and he walks back to the castle, where he knows there are people waiting for him.

Chapter End Notes

o7

So, regarding Dream. This was probably the most difficult narrative choice I've had to make in this fic, and I went back and forth for a long time about it, trying to figure out whether he should stay dead or not. Eventually, this is what I went with, because I feel like the biggest theme of this fic is that everyone can change, and I didn't quite like the idea of Dream being the only one who didn't get that opportunity, when everyone else influenced by the dreamon stuff will get that chance.

That being said, I do want to clarify that this is a choice I'd make only for the c!Dream as he is in this fic, semi-possessed as he was. As I've said before, I'm not a c!Dream apologist, and I'm not rooting for a redemption in canon, but his character in this fic has diverged enough from his canon counterpart that I felt that this would be an okay route to take. But I would also like to say that whether he was semi-possessed or not, nobody that he's hurt is obligated to forgive him, *especially* c!Tommy, and in future installments of this series, you certainly won't see him suddenly be all buddy-buddy with the people he's harmed. Should I elaborate on his path going forward, it's certainly not going to be easy for him, and he will continue to face consequences for his actions. So in case any of you were concerned about that, there it is.

Here's [my tumblr](#) and without further ado, here is the chapter preview, for the last time.

Next up, Chapter Twenty-Three: In which they all start to heal. And in every ending, there is a new beginning.

(you are love)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He builds himself a house by the sea.

It takes a few weeks to decide on exactly where, and a few weeks again before he recovers enough to put his plans in action, but he finds a spot he likes. A little stretch not too far from Tubbo's settlement of Snowchester, and not too far from Tommy's house, off the Prime Path but not too distant from it. There's a quiet bit of beach, and a few grassy hills behind it, and plenty of open air.

"Here?" Tommy says, wrinkling his nose.

"Here," he says. He leans on the cane he's taken to carrying; he has bouts of exhaustion that he can't seem to shake, still, and he'd rather have something to support himself than topple over every time the dizziness gets too intense or his legs suddenly become too weak to hold him. Tommy teases him continually, but Phil's given him one of the ones he uses, well-crafted, delicately carved wood and an embossed handle. Thinking about how distinguished it looks helps him get past his fear of showing weakness.

(he's getting better at remembering that needing help does not imply weakness at all. he's not quite there yet, but better)

"I think it's nice," Tubbo says. He's standing on his other side, flanking him rather than Tommy. Tubbo and Tommy have been cycling back and forth between avoiding one another and refusing to leave each others' sides, of late, ever since the Egg and Tubbo's near-death, and Wilbur's not quite sure what to do about it. Not quite sure if he can do anything about it.

(but there will be time)

"You would, bee boy," Tommy says, and Tubbo reaches around behind him to swat Tommy on the arm. So they're doing alright today, then.

"I like it myself," he says, taking a few steps forward. The waves lap against the shore, blue ocean against pale white sand. "Not too close to anything, but not too far."

It wouldn't take too long, walking along the beach, to come within sight of the prison. But it's not visible from here, and that is what matters most to him. He hears they're debating demolishing it, anyway. Since there's no one left to hold in it, and hopefully, there never will be again. At the very least, Sam will need help with it; the last time Wilbur saw him, he looked far less stressed. Like a weight had been taken from his shoulders. Wilbur is glad for him.

"Well, if you put it like that," Tommy says, cracking his knuckles. "Alright, how much cobble are we gonna need?"

It is his turn to smack Tommy, and Tommy yelps, rubbing his arm and staring at him balefully.

“You assume we’re using cobble at all,” he says. “Not everyone believes it’s the height of building material, child.”

“Not everyone is as poggers as I am,” Tommy says, “dickhead.”

He hits Tommy on the shins with his cane. Tommy yelps again, and Tubbo laughs, and so does he.

They do use cobblestone for the house. He doesn’t have the heart to tell him no, not when he sees how much Tommy lights up when he allows him to use it. There is something endearing about his love for the stone, his excitement at getting to build with it. But they use other stone, too, and various woods, and then Tubbo makes a whole section entirely out of concrete, for some reason, and after that, all bets are off.

It is a house, certainly, by the time they’re done with it. Though it also looks somewhat like a child’s first art project, and Tommy insisted on building a cobblestone tower in the back of it.

The first time Phil comes by after they finish, he stands in front of it for a long moment, just staring, saying nothing at all. And then, he breaks out into gales of laughter, bent over at the waist, and all the crows that accompanied him start cawing, like they’re laughing too, the fuckers.

“Oh my god, shut up,” Wilbur says. “Just because you’re too old to appreciate ingenuity—”

“As long as it’s standing,” Phil says, as soon as he can manage to form words. Wilbur crosses his arms, hoping to convey how very unimpressed he is, but that just sets him off again, and it’s another full minute before he seems to be able to control himself. “Sorry, sorry. But looking at it, it’s so easy to tell who helped you with it.”

“I don’t think that’s a bad thing,” he says.

“Neither do I,” Phil says, smiling. He’s been looking better too, lately. Still older, still wearier, but he’s quicker to smile, his face no longer perpetually lined with stress or grief. Though some of that grief still shines through his eyes whenever he looks at him, it’s fading. No longer as present.

From around the back, he hears a shout, outraged. Tubbo. Followed shortly by Tommy's cackling.

"Don't murder each other, please!" he calls out over his shoulder. "It'd be a fucking mess to clean up."

Phil snorts. "I'm glad they're doing better." He meets his eyes. "I'm glad you are, too."

He lifts his shoulder in half a shrug, his lips twitching upward. "As good as I can be," he says. "Did Techno come with?"

"Right," Phil says, "so, Skeppy's been up and about lately. And he's apparently determined to rekindle whatever the fuck their friendship is, and I have no desire to be anywhere near while that's going on. I have absolutely no idea how he and Techno mesh so well."

"So you've run away here," he says. "Probably smart of you."

Phil hums. "I mean, I also just wanted to see how things were coming," he says, "but yeah. And I wanted to tell you, I've finally started work on a place of my own. Seemed like the right time for it."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah." Phil pauses, and the rest comes out like an admission. "It's still right next to Techno's. I'm making a bridge and everything. You should've seen the look on his face when I said I was building my own place. Like I'd just kicked one of his dogs right in front of him. Except he was trying to be stoic, but you know how he is. Dramatic little shit. Of course he couldn't say outright that he didn't want me to leave."

"Of course. He's very dramatic," he agrees, with far more enthusiasm than he, personally, has a right to have, on this matter. And then, he raises an eyebrow. "Wait, did you say you're making a little bridge? A little—god, Phil, that's so fucking lame. And almost nauseatingly sweet, but so lame."

"Shut," Phil says, though from the annoyed glance he shoots at the crows, Wilbur can tell that the birds are on his side. "But what I really wanted to tell you, was that you're welcome any time. I wanted to make sure you knew that. And if you wanted to make yourself a place to stay up there, too, we have more than enough space. Call it a winter home." Phil shrugs. He has his wings under a cloak again. Though he doesn't always, and that's some progress, at least. "Or don't, but the option's there. But in case you ever get tired of—whatever the fuck this is supposed to be." He makes a gesture, and Wilbur rolls his eyes. But then, Phil's gaze shifts. "And that goes for either of you, too. I know you've got places already, but—" He trails off, a bit awkwardly, but the gesture is clear enough.

A hand, extended. And in Phil's own way, an apology, continued. Wilbur shifts on his feet, angles himself so he can see both Phil and the boys, who've come round to the front of the house. Tubbo is, for some reason, covered in dirt.

“I’m pretty comfortable in Snowchester, thanks,” Tubbo says. “But I suppose you could come visit me sometimes. We’ve got loads of empty houses.”

A shadow passes over his face at that. Wilbur hasn’t been able to get him to talk about Jack Manifold. But he knows that Jack used to live there. He assumes that he doesn’t anymore, but beyond that, he knows nothing.

“Do you mean that?” Tommy says, squinting. “You’d just, what, let us come up there and build all over the place? Really?”

“There’s room,” Phil says.

“And you wouldn’t destroy it?” Tommy presses. “What about Techno’s property value? He’s rather fond of going on and on about that. Fucking nonsense if you ask me.”

“Techno can live with it,” Phil says. “The offer comes from him as well. Though he told me to tell you that he reserves the right to gripe and moan at all hours of the day if you make something ugly. And I will mock you for it. But no, we won’t destroy it.” His face softens. “That’d sort of ruin the point of inviting you over, wouldn’t it?”

It is an olive branch. Yet another one. And everyone here knows it. Weeks ago, it wouldn’t have been accepted. Would have been spat at, trampled upon.

“Huh,” Tommy says. “I’ll think about it. Got to decide whether to gift you all with my presence or not.”

It’s not a no. Not a flat refusal. Not all is forgiven, but not all is lost, and Wilbur has never been so sure as in this moment that everything will be alright again. They will come back together. Slowly, but glue takes time to dry. Not all is forgiven, and perhaps not all should be, but not all must be forgiven in order for there still to be love.

(and they will have time)

“Do you want to stay for dinner?” he asks. “We’ve got—well, I’m not actually sure what we’ve still got, but I’m sure we’ve got something. I’ve learned to cook a bit better than the last time you let me in a kitchen.”

(he was fourteen, and the incident ended with smoke pouring out of the windows, and a charred platter of what might, once, have been chicken. but he’s gotten better since then, has had to, considering that he was responsible for Tommy after they left home, and they were on the road for a while before they settled into the SMP, and so he knows how to use a fire to warm a meal, now, knows how to use a fire for something other than destruction, though that was something he forgot, once, or at least tossed to the side)

Phil smiles, and the corners of his eyes crinkle. “I’d like that,” he says.

They have dinner. It’s only slightly burnt, and Tommy doesn’t throw his utensils at Phil and only throws his food once, and whenever the atmosphere gets tense, they’re able to recover, and when Phil leaves, he feels satisfied, feels like this has gone right, and he hopes that it

continues this way, because this house is going to be his but he wants all his family to be welcome here, too, and welcome with each other.

One afternoon, he is startled from his work—not work, really, just some blank pages in front of him and a pen in his hand because he wants to write something but doesn't quite know what yet—by the sound of a sheep. Not entirely uncommon; the lands behind his house are hilly, fairly open, and sheep come by to graze. But then, the sheep baas again, and again, and he realizes that the baas are steadily approaching, so he stands up and looks out the window and sees Ranboo walking along the beach toward the house, leading a sheep behind him.

The sheep is blue.

He goes to the front door. Today is a better day, physically, and the cane rests against the wall, readily available should he need it, though he thinks he won't. He's gotten better at picking out which days will be better and which worse, in that respect. But he feels strangely lightheaded, for some reason. He's not sure it has anything to do with his health at all.

He steps outside before Ranboo has to come up and knock.

“Hello, Ranboo,” he says. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Tommy and Tubbo have been his most frequent visitors, in the time since getting the house finished. There have been others, though, and perhaps that number will increase, now that the rest of the server is settling into itself as well. He's been building, and others have been rebuilding, from what he's heard.

He thinks that soon, he will feel ready to go out and join their efforts. Or at least, to socialize. Put himself out there in a situation where their lives aren't hanging in the balance. The prospect is daunting, more than he wants to admit to anyone else, because he's accustomed to putting on a front when he's around others, especially others that he doesn't know all that well, but now there's no need for it, no need for the mask of the general or the president or anything else. And he doesn't quite like the idea of being known as himself.

(because still, he struggles with the idea that himself is someone worth knowing)

He'll work up to it.

Perhaps this is a start. He hasn't really talked to Ranboo much. Not since everything, and at least, not individually, though both Phil and Techno have assured him that there was some kind of mind control going on that morning, when the enchantments went down. He is not

very good at trusting people, but he trusts Phil and Techno, so by extension, Ranboo has the benefit of the doubt as well.

“Hi, Wilbur,” Ranboo says. “Uh, I’d say the same thing, except this is your house, so I guess it’d kind of be weird, coming from me. Since you live here and all.”

“I hope I was the one you were expecting to find,” he says, and takes a few steps closer. He glances between Ranboo’s forehead and the sheep behind him. The blue sheep.

“For sure,” Ranboo says. “Uh, yeah, actually, so—you’re probably wondering why I brought you a sheep.”

There’s only one reason why Ranboo would be bringing him a blue sheep. And yet, he still feels anticipatory. He wants to hear it.

“I can probably guess,” he says. “But I would like to know, yes.”

“Right,” Ranboo says. “So, this morning, I was with Tommy and Tubbo, and Tommy remembered that in Dream’s, uh, vault—thing. The one where everybody came and put him in prison? I don’t know how much you know about that. I don’t know all that much about that, actually. But anyway, Tommy remembered that Dream had his old pet cow in there. I guess it died and then Dream used the revive book to bring it back or something like that? But we went to go get his cow, and Sam came and helped, and when we got there, uh. Well, it wasn’t just the cow? I said I’d take them to you. I thought you might want to see them?”

His eyes dart back and forth. Ranboo’s forehead. The sheep.

The sheep.

“I’m not Ghostbur,” he says, and keeps his voice even. Ranboo’s shoulders hunch slightly.

“I know,” he says. “I just figured—”

“I’ll take them,” he says, and holds his hand out for the lead. “Thank you for bringing them.”

“Oh! Uh, yeah, sure, no problem,” Ranboo says. He takes a step forward, closing the distance between them, and places the lead in his hand. The sheep follows behind placidly, evidently content with their lot. “It’s a, uh, really nice house you’ve got here.”

He shoots him a wry look. “Blame Tommy,” he says. The sheep toddles closer to him, and noses at the sand by his feet.

“I figured,” Ranboo says. That’s the end of it, or at least, it should be. Ranboo’s done what he came here to do. The sheep is in his care. Instead, though, Ranboo shifts his weight between his feet. “Um, while I was here, I also wanted to make sure I apologized to you. For what I did that morning. I didn’t think that I had, so. Yeah. I don’t remember doing it. I think—I think it won’t happen again? I hope. But I wanted to say sorry. It wasn’t something I wanted to do.”

“Phil and Techno have told me as much,” he says. “Can you be sure? That it won’t happen again?”

Ranboo hesitates. And then, his shoulders set.

“I sleepwalk. I, uh—I mentioned that to you, I think,” he says. “But this wasn’t that. I’m almost certain. And—” He hesitates, and Wilbur keeps his expression level. “I used to hear Dream’s voice in my head, sometimes. I don’t, anymore.”

The admission is strained. Halting. He clearly doesn’t want to be talking about this. And something in Wilbur wants to keep pressing him, wants to be sure, wants to know for a fact that Tommy and Tubbo’s friend won’t be used against them, won’t be used as an instrument for their enemies.

But then, there are no enemies left, are there?

And to push him past the point of comfort wouldn’t be fair to him. He’s trying to be fair. Trying not to let his own impulses, his own need to know, to be in control, to hurt anyone.

“Alright,” he says. “That’s good.” And because Ranboo clearly needs a bit of reassurance, after that, he says, “You seem like a good friend to have, Ranboo. Everything else aside. I look forward to getting to know you.”

And it’s not a lie.

(because they will have time)

Ranboo brightens. “Thank you, Wilbur,” he says. “I guess I’ll see you around?”

He smiles, a bit. “You will,” he agrees.

And that is the end of it, this time. Ranboo goes off, back in the direction he came from, likely to rejoin Tommy and Tubbo, wherever they’ve gotten off to. And Tommy’s cow, which Wilbur’s not sure he—unless they’re talking about Henry? That was Tommy’s cow’s name, right? He hasn’t had cause to think about that animal in a long time.

And he has his own animal to think about at the moment.

The sheep hasn’t been paying him much attention, still snuffling in the sand, like they think they’ll find grass there if they try hard enough. He kneels in front of them, tugging on the lead a bit, and they look up at him, eyes big and dark. Their wool is just as blue as he remembers.

“Hello, Friend,” he says.

Friend blinks at him. But doesn’t go back to ignoring him, at least.

“Do you remember me?” he asks. “I’m very different now. I’m not really the same at all.” He puts his hand out, palm up. Friend sniffs at it, nudges it, and then looks at him again, almost accusingly. “Sorry, I’ve not got any food. I’ll take you round to the back. There’s lots of grass

behind the house.” He pauses. “If that’s alright with you, of course. I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to stay here. Fucking hell, I’m talking to a sheep.”

He’s a little exasperated with himself. But at the same time, Friend is important, even if they aren’t important to him, specifically. Even if it was Ghostbur and not him who—

(but he’s thought about this and)

“You were a good friend to Ghostbur,” he says. “You really were. He loved you a lot.”

Friend regards him. And Friend is a sheep, of course, so there are likely no thoughts behind their eyes at all, but somehow, they seem thoughtful, considering. And then, they take a step forward, their hooves clomping in the sand, and they shove their face against his chest. Hard, forceful, and he sits back on his haunches. His hands come up to clutch at their wool before he even knows what he’s doing. And he can’t seem to make himself let go.

“Oh,” he says. “Oh.”

How many times did

(he)

Ghostbur do this? Sit and spend time with his friend, hug his friend, because when Ghostbur had his Friend all seemed right with the world. How many times did

(his)

Ghostbur’s blue-stained hands find themselves in this exact position?

Friend lifts their head slightly and nuzzles against his neck. And something settles within him, something sweet, something gentle, something sad. Something he knew all along, but didn’t let himself understand.

“Oh,” he says again. “You’ve been a good friend to me, haven’t you?”

(in the end he and Ghostbur are one are one in the same because there are no ghosts of living men and ghosts do not die so Ghostbur is within him now has returned to the source to the whole they are whole and they were different but they were the same and his ghost was still him and Ghostbur’s kindness was his and Ghostbur’s love was his and Ghostbur’s desire to help was his it was his it is his and Ghostbur is with him and it is all him both the sweet and the bitter because the love is his is his is his comes from him and is his and Ghostbur’s both and they are one and he can no longer reject who Ghostbur was and is and is still)

“I’m different,” he says. “But I’m me. I’d like it if you’d like to stay, Friend.”

Friend plops their head on his shoulder, and that is answer enough.

He decides he wants a garden in his backyard.

“You want a what,” Tommy says, his face scrunching when Wilbur tells him the idea.

“Tommy,” he says. “Tommy, look out there. What do you see?”

“It’s grass, innit?” Tommy says. He casts barely a glance out the window. But that’s fine. Visuals aren’t necessarily required to make his point.

“Exactly,” he says. “It’s just grass. It’s boring. It doesn’t match with the house.”

“The house is a travesty,” Tommy says, sounding out the word and pitching it so that it’s a compliment, something to be impressed by.

“Exactly,” he says. “I want a garden, Tommy. Help me make a garden.”

Tommy complains. He bitches and moans, especially after Wilbur decides that he wants flowers, too, in addition to growing food. But Wilbur knows that Tommy likes flowers, despite what he might say. That Tommy has an appreciation for beautiful things, that he can sit and stare at a field of dandelions for hours and be content. So Tommy helps him with his garden. It becomes a project of theirs, mornings and evenings spent outside, in the hours of the day that aren’t too hot for yardwork.

And Tommy isn’t the only one. Tubbo advises him on what he might do if he decided to keep bees. Ranboo comes by with roses, and somehow, Tommy ends up with a crown of alliums in his hair, red-faced and glaring and refusing to talk about it but also refusing to take it off. About this time, Technoblade begins to visit occasionally, halting and awkward and perplexed by the whole business, but together, he and Tommy manage to get Technoblade to participate, and it is good, and he is glad, because he remembers a conversation held on top of a hill. Remembers *I’ll help with your omelet, but that’s all*, remembers *I’m finished*, remembers *I’m not ready for that*, and it warms his heart that Techno is here, with them. That he is willing to be. That he is willing to try, and all of the others, too.

And then, there is—

“So, uh,” Fundy says. “This is a nice thing you’ve got going on here.”

He looks up from his weeding. Squints against the sun that outlines his son, who is standing there, bouncing awkwardly on his heels and shifting his hands every now and then, like he doesn’t know what to do with them.

“I’m fond of it myself,” he says. “I never thought I would, before. But a lack of responsibilities is rather—freeing. And I suppose I needed it. Or at least, so people tell me.”

That's one of the things he has the most trouble with. He has many restless days, days where he longs to be doing something, to be out there, to be taking the world onto his shoulders once again because the weight is what he is used to, and he doesn't know how to be weightless. But no one ever seems to like the idea when he brings it up, and some part of him, too, is reluctant, because some part of him, a large part of him, rather likes his newfound peace.

(rather likes learning how to live for the simpler things, not for wars or countries or grand ideals, but for his ugly house and the sheep that now roves close by and the laughter of his family and the trees and the flowers and the blue, blue waves and for himself)

"That's—really nice," Fundy says, and then stops. Wilbur waits, feeling oddly eager, but also like if he presses, Fundy might disappear. Might back out of whatever he's here to say. "Do you—I mean, do you think it would be alright if I came over here sometimes? And maybe helped? I could be really good at gardening. Maybe."

He's wavering. Uncertain. Of his welcome, perhaps.

In a way, he is right to be. Wilbur still remembers the moment Fundy disowned him. And he knows now that it was a lie, that Fundy had entrenched himself deeply in the enemy's camp, that he was a spy, that he was on his side, but the memory still stings. It stings because the best lies, the most convincing lies, have at least a kernel of truth to them, and Fundy was convincing. Fundy was very convincing.

And Wilbur is certain that somewhere along the line, he failed as a father.

So they have hurt each other, then. Wounded each other. But in the end, Wilbur wants to heal. He wants to heal, wants to grow, and he wants his son. He wants his son with him. He wants a chance to repair his mistakes, wants to be a better parent.

"I'd love it if you would," he says, and Fundy relaxes.

"Cool," he says. "Um, that's great."

Wilbur extends a hand. Fundy, after a moment, takes it, and he yanks him down next to him. Fundy lands with a startled *oomph*, but after a second, he scoots closer, and Wilbur's chest fills with warmth. Because nothing is perfect, and perhaps nothing is even approaching right, but it is a start. It has to be a start. His son next to him, listening as he explains what he's working on, what flowers are going to go where. His son, with him, not turning away, and he does not turn away from him in return. And perhaps that's all that's necessary.

He finds Niki in the backyard one evening, watching the house, brushing her fingers against the sunflowers that rise tall in the grass. He's not sure whether to approach her or not; she makes no move to come closer. But at the end of the day, he has never been renowned for his ability to leave well enough alone, and that has not changed. Likely never will. So he steps outside, and she turns her attention to him as he comes closer.

"I'm not sure what I was expecting," she says. Her voice is quiet. Drained. She looks tired. She has the hood of his coat draped around her shoulders like a shawl. He's not wearing the coat it comes from at the moment. He doesn't wear it as much these days at all. He feels vulnerable without it, in much the same way that Tubbo feels vulnerable without armor or Techno without a weapon, but he's been trying that on for size, lately. Being vulnerable.

(because vulnerable doesn't mean weak and it doesn't mean soft but it is good to be vulnerable sometimes, good to let people in, if he can, and it is difficult for him, but worth it, worth the reward, worth the smiles in everyone's eyes and the lack of self-hatred when he looks in the mirror)

"Not this?" he asks, and stops walking a few paces away. Farther than he would have, once. Farther than he wants.

"Probably not," she says. "I don't think I should be here, but I wanted to see."

"Where should you be, then?"

She smiles. There is little warmth in it, little of anything other than something bitter, a little self-loathing. He knows that expression all too well.

"I don't know," she says. "Somewhere else. Anywhere else. I have a place of my own, I suppose, but it's pretty empty."

His heart cracks. His legs are shaking; he probably should have brought his cane along with him. But if he goes back to get it now, he fears she'll be gone when he returns.

"How are you, Niki?" he says, and she laughs. Again, it's bitter.

"Of course, you're asking me now," she says. "After all this time. It doesn't do any good. Not for either of us. I don't even know why I'm here. It's not because I wanted to see you."

That hurts. That hurts, and it is a struggle to keep it from showing. From the way she's studying his face, he doesn't think he succeeds. He's not sure that he cares, because he can't stop remembering Niki in the Egg's room, Niki with her sword held to Tommy's throat, Niki painted with red light and glaring, angry and hateful, hands covered in blood rather than flour.

"I understand that," he says. "But I—Niki, when I was Ghostbur, I didn't forget you. You were one of the only people Ghostbur remembered fully, in fact. I didn't forget you. I swear, I never forgot you."

Perhaps it is selfish of him, that this is what he most wants to address. More than the pain he's caused her, more than her feelings about Tommy. He needs her to know that she's wrong, that he never forgot her at all.

Niki tilts her head. Closes her eyes.

"I think that might make it worse," she says. "If that's true, then why did I only find out you were alive because the Egg"—Her voice cracks on the word—"told me? Why did I first see you when you came to destroy one of the only hopes I had?"

No. She can't actually think that the Egg—

"Niki—"

"I know," she says, holding up a hand to forestall him. "I know it was bad. It's so obvious in hindsight. The way it got—it got in my head. It never wanted to help me, it just wanted me to hurt people. I understand that. And I was happy to let it, if I finally got what I wanted. But in the end, I left with nothing. That's what always happens."

He closes his eyes. And then opens them again. The image dancing on the back of his eyelids doesn't help, the image of brighter days, days long gone by, Niki smiling, Niki laughing, Niki with bread in her hands, Niki making them a flag, tall and proud and flapping in the wind, Niki standing by him, Niki caring for him unconditionally. She was one of the only people he trusted could do that. Love him, without a reason as to why.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"I don't know if that makes anything better, either," she says. "Sorry doesn't change the fact that my home is gone. I stayed on this server because I loved it. I loved our nation. And it was destroyed. Schlatt turned it into a place I didn't recognize, and then you took care of the rest. And you took yourself with it." Her hands come up, draw the hood closer to herself. She casts her eyes to the sky, to the stars. "Some days, I think that maybe it was all bad from the start. That's the only way I can stand it, is if I think like that. I burned the L'Mantree down, and in the end all I felt was hollow."

Her words are like a reflection.

"It wasn't all bad," he says, voice hoarse. "I used to think that. I thought that I built it on a flawed foundation, that because I myself was flawed, and I started it, it all needed to go." Niki looks to him at that, visibly startled. "And me with it, of course. Some days, I still think like that. But I'm trying not to. I'm trying to—" He breaks off, and inches closer. Close enough to touch her, if he reached out, or if she did. "There were good times. They're still hard for me to think about, considering everything that followed. But there were good times. There was goodness there. It was real."

"Then what am I supposed to think about *you*?" Niki snaps. "You say that there was goodness, but you were the one who took it away! You destroyed it all. You, and Schlatt before you, and then Tommy kept bringing conflict with him wherever he went, and everything went to hell. It was hell, and I was stuck in it, *alone*."

“I’m sorry,” he repeats. “You have a right to think that. You’d be justified. You don’t ever have to forgive me. But I am sorry, for hurting you. And I’m sorry that you were alone. I am so, so sorry.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” she says. “That doesn’t change what I’ve been through.”

“I know,” he says. Because that’s all he can say.

Or—no. No it isn’t.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come to see you, too,” he says. Niki’s eyes widen. “I’m a coward at the end of the day. Just ask Fundy. I was scared to face people, and to a large degree, I still am. I know what I’ve done. I know what harm I’ve caused. But please don’t think I avoided you because I don’t care. I do. I always have. I’m just not particularly brave.”

“I always thought you were one of the bravest people I knew,” Niki says. “In some ways, I still believe that. Even after everything.” Her face twists, as if she’s not sure how to feel about what she just said. He isn’t sure how to feel about it either. And then, her shoulders slump. “I need to go. I don’t even know what I was looking for, here.”

“Did you find it?” he asks. “Whatever it was?”

“I don’t know that, either,” she says.

The words are on the tip of his tongue. He doesn’t know whether it would be wise to say them or not.

But he has never claimed to be wise.

“You’re always welcome here,” he says softly. “I mean that. If you—just if you wanted. I understand if you don’t. But—I know it’s too late to change what’s already happened. But I’d like to be a better friend, if you’d let me. And I know others would like that chance, too.”

“You were a perfect friend,” Niki whispers. “Until you weren’t. That’s the problem.” She takes a step back, but doesn’t flee, as he’d half-feared she would. “I need time. I need to figure out what I want. I feel as though I don’t know anything right now.”

“Okay,” he says. It’s a farewell, and he knows it. A farewell, but maybe not forever, because it’s also not a no. It’s not an *I don’t want to see you again*. Maybe, just maybe, it’s not an ending. “Please be safe?”

“I will be.” She smiles, and this one is just a little more genuine. Just a little. “I’d say the same to you, but I don’t know if that would make a difference.”

“It would.”

“Then be safe, Wilbur,” she says, and she turns. And—he can’t help himself. He takes another step toward her.

“Niki?” he says, and she stops, but doesn’t turn back. “Please don’t blame Tommy for things that aren’t his fault.” He leaves the rest unspoken. *Don’t hurt him. I’ll stop you.* He can’t bring himself to say it outright, because voicing it would make it more real, would force him to confront the fact that she has literally tried to kill his little brother several times over, and he doesn’t have the strength for that right now. But the distance between them is not so great that she can’t hear it.

“Always Tommy, with you,” she says, but she doesn’t sound angry. Just tired. “I need to figure myself out. Who knows, maybe we really all will be friends again, someday.”

And then, she is gone, vanished into the night. And she didn’t sound all that hopeful, but the fact that she said it at all means something, he thinks. He hopes.

He still has hope. He has hope, and that is important. He is learning to hold faster to it, and perhaps she can too. Perhaps.

Perhaps they will be friends again. There will be time.

Not every day is a good day, of course.

Not every day is a good day, and sometimes, he wakes up and can’t get out of bed. Sometimes, he wakes up, and he knows that if he tries to go about his business, his chest will scream out in protest and his legs will tremble and buckle and refuse to hold him. Sometimes, on those days, he tries anyway, and faces the results.

And the bad days come in other forms besides that.

Not every day is a good day, and sometimes, he wakes up and doesn’t *want* to get out of bed. On those days, he exists in a grey haze, his ribs tight and his limbs weighed down. There is nothing to do but stare at the ceiling and think about how much he should be getting up, and how much he has no desire to do so.

Sometimes, on those days, he is left alone. But not usually. People come in and out, talking to him, trying to cheer him up, and sometimes it’s ineffective. But more often, it’s not, or at least, not entirely, and they manage to drag him up and about, manage to get him to eat and bathe and hold a conversation, as little energy as he has for it. Tommy’s the best at it, Tommy with his overwhelming presence and refusal to take no for an answer. Tommy’s the best at it, and on these days, he spends a lot of time in the company of his little brother, doing his best to stay afloat. And Tommy never asks anything more than that of him. Staying afloat.

Sometimes, people don't stay. Sometimes, they have other things to do. Or, less frequently, he manages to frustrate them, when his stubbornness and pride prevent him from responding to their overtures with anything more than a glower or a few muttered words. And when they leave, that sets him spiraling, sets him to wondering about his worth and about how terrible he knows he is, and that leads to bad places. Dark places.

But then, they come back. They always come back. They come back, because even when he frustrates them, they love him. They want to help him. And he's getting better at remembering that, better at remembering that he can accept their help, and that they will come back. That leaving isn't forever. That, perhaps, he is not destined to drive away everyone who cares for him. That he is worthy.

He has trouble with the idea, still. And not every day is a good day. But he's getting better at it. He's getting better.

(and he will have time)

But not every day is a good day, and sometimes, he wakes up and the shadows close in around him. Sometimes, his mind revolts against him, insists that he is doing nothing of worth and he is nothing of worth, that it is only a matter of time before he finds himself alone, before everyone around him chooses to abandon him, sick of his inability to do anything of note. That everything he touches falls to ruin, and so it would be better if he touched nothing at all. That he is a failure, an impostor, a villain fooling people into giving him love that he does not deserve.

On those days, his words fail him, shrivel up like worms too long in the sun. On those days, he can barely stand to be around anyone, their presence grating on him. On those days, he flinches at noises that are too loud, mistakes thunder for explosions, and gets lost in his own memories, in the darkness of the ravine and the dimness of the room, buttons casting long shadows on the wall, his song etched into stone in thin, sprawling handwriting.

And on the worst days, he lashes out. Spits bitter vitriol at those who dare to come close, aiming to wound, to hurt, to injure, and he always feels terrible about it but not terrible enough to stop, because if he is going to be left, going to be abandoned, then it is better to drive them away himself, better to cause the divide rather than wait for it to happen. And better to shove them away and hurt them in the doing than allow them to stay, and hurt them worse, let them get caught up in his self-combustion.

On the worst days, he can't see anything past his own self-loathing.

But they don't give up on him. They don't always stay—and they should not, he thinks. Should not allow him to hurt them just because he himself is hurting. But they return to him, just as on all the other days. When he is alone, it is never forever, and they prove time and time again that they do not intend to leave.

Guilt is a potent, bitter mixture. He should not be testing them like this. He has no right. But the one time he voices as much aloud, Tommy stares at him and informs him in no certain words that yes, perhaps it's a bit fucked up of him, but they're all a bit fucked up, and healing isn't linear, and several other things that he's pretty sure that Captain Puffy told him.

“And we care about you, dickhead,” Tommy says. “We don’t mind having to do this until we convince you about it. We—I mean, we love you, you know? So we’ll keep telling you that until you get it through your stupid head.”

He seems embarrassed, but frightfully sincere. And that, really, is that.

(he doesn’t know when Tommy got so wise)

So not every day is a good day. For him, or for everyone else. And he hurts people, still. Even when he doesn’t want to.

But gradually, less often. The urge to cut down to the quick simmers away. And the inclination to hurt himself along with them dwindles.

Not every day is a good day. It is unlikely that every day ever will be.

But the good days come more often, and the bad days are fewer and farther between.

He gets better. Because those around him deserve to be treated kindly, and so does he, too. And he deserves to live, and to be well.

Tommy barges in one day, eyes wide and sparkling, mouth set in a grin. He jolts, fingers spasming on his guitar strings. He’s been trying to write new music. He hasn’t come up with anything that he likes, yet, but he feels like he’s on the verge of something good. Like if he keeps at it, the notes will come to him again, just as they once did, before countries and wars and deaths, when it was him and his instrument and a bright day stretching on into forever. And he was young, and the world was, too.

“Wilbur!” Tommy says. “I’m gonna have a hotel!”

He blinks. And then sets his guitar down. Grabs his cane and stands, because he has a feeling this might be a *thing*.

“You’re gonna have a what now?” he asks, and Tommy beams at him, rubbing his hands together.

“I’m commissioning Sam to build me a hotel,” he says. “It’s gonna be right near my house, and I’m gonna be in charge of it, and it’s gonna be a real fancy kind of place. A place that I reckon everyone’s gonna want to come see, that’s how cool it’s gonna be. And people will pay me loads of diamonds to stay, and then, Wilbur, do you want to know the best part?”

“What’s the best part?” he asks.

“Wilbur,” Tommy says, and leans in closer. “I’m going to rob them blind.”

He laughs out loud. Tommy joins in a second later, cackling, and for a bit, that’s all he can hear. Their laughter, joined together. Loud and uproarious.

And this feels—this feels right. This feels like something good, like something returning to the way it should be. Tommy, excited about a project, already planning ways to scam people out of their goods. Devious and delighted, a clever con artist, and most of all, a teenager having fun.

“So I was wondering,” Tommy says, once his laughter has died down, “do you want to come help me with it? I have to get Sam a bunch of materials for him to use while he’s building it.” His eyes squint. “He’s making me wear a hard hat and everything.”

“Tommy,” he says, “I’d love to.”

And Tommy’s face lights up.

So Tommy leads him out of his house, in the direction of the nearest part of the Prime Path. They pass Friend as they go, and Friend decides to come along, trotting along on their heels. And he casts a glance back at the house, at the cobbled-together, disaster of a structure, all different colors and materials and cobblestone sticking out at all sorts of odd angles and in a tower at the back. And the garden behind it, colorful and thriving and more than half dandelions, blowing in the wind. And the sand, and the sea, and the blue sky above them.

And he follows Tommy, and he feels content. Feels like this is, at last, where he’s meant to be. His brother beside him, the rest of his family not too far off, a place he can call his own and a grand new adventure to be embarked upon. Plans to be made, something new to be created, and at the end of the day, a place to return to, a place to call his own, a place with lots and lots of space for everyone he cares about. Perhaps that’s all he really needs.

That, and a song on his lips, ready to be played, finally. Something new.

(and time to sing it, time enough for them all)

He has Tommy in his ear. The sun is shining. Friend noses at his hand, which is not stained with blue, but does not need to be, because he does not need to give blue to help those around

him, because his are hands that have seen war and pain and death but have relearned other things, have relearned how to hold and how to heal and how to dance again.

His boots hit the wood of the path. His house is just barely in view behind, and ahead of him, the rest of the SMP awaits. Tommy grins at him, and he grins back.

It feels like hope, and it feels like a beginning, and it feels like the excitement of turning the page and realizing that the story isn't over just yet, and above all else, and most importantly, his heart has settled, and it feels like

(home)

home.

Chapter End Notes

And so it comes to a close.

It's been almost exactly six months to the day since I posted the first chapter of this story. Originally, I thought it would be about 2-4k words per chapter, done in about 70k or so, and that it would take me a few months at most. And now, it's a 150k+ word behemoth, with a series soon to follow after it. And honestly, I wouldn't have it any other way. Being able to tell this story has become so important to me over these past six months, and I'm so glad that we've finally made it here, to the conclusion.

Thank you to all of you who have supported this fic. Thank you to those who commented on every chapter, most chapters, a few chapters, or only one. Thank you to those who left kudos, or put a comment in your bookmark where I could see it. Thank you to the silent lurkers for sticking around this far. Thank you to those who have been here since the beginning, and to those who found this fic last week. I never could have made it this far without all of you, so from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Now that this is done, I've got other projects I'm working on, if you'd be interested in them, like a [president c!Wilbur fix-it fic](#) I hope to get finished soon, a [time travel au](#) I'm going to be updating more, and an Anastasia au that I haven't started posting yet, but aim to in the near future. And of course, this story isn't over quite yet. This fic may be done,

but these characters are embarking on a new chapter of their lives, so this series will be updated in the future. There's more stories to be shared in this 'verse yet.

Until then, thank you all again. And I'll see you next time!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!